スレイヤーズすぺしゃる❹

魔道士協会の陰謀

神坂 一

イラスト あらいずみるい

富士見ファンタジア文庫

Slayers Special Volume 4

Conspiracy of the Sorcerers' Guild

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The Vegetable Battle

"Stop! Lucas! It's reckless!"

The commotion in the shop erupted just as I had finished off four different types of daily specials and was basking in the pleasant comfort of being about eighty percent full.

Wrestling at the entrance were a man who looked like a warrior and a woman.

"Let me go, Elia! I can't just let that thing have its way like this!"

"But...!"

Cutting her off, the man shouted into the shop.

"Is there anyone... anyone who will lend me their strength!?"

"...Whoa now, Lucas... what's all the fuss about? What is this?"

The one who finally spoke up was the old man who owned the shop.

...So, it seemed this guy was a local of this town, but...

"I'm going to take it down! That thing... that Black Dragon!"

Literally—

The man's single sentence froze the customers inside the shop.

"That story—why don't you tell me more about it?"

The one who broke the silence was none other than me.

"—A... And you are...?"

I answered the questioning man.

"Lina—Lina Inverse."

"I see... so you're the one..."

Sitting across the table, Lucas-san nodded deeply.

He was a young man with short-cropped black hair; he wasn't particularly tall, but he had a sturdy build.

His equipment was extremely ordinary: a longsword and leather armor.

"Is she famous?"

Elia-san, sitting next to him, asked him in a small voice.

She was a plain town girl.

Fair-skinned and slender, she was quite a beauty.

"Yeah. You've probably heard the rumors. This is the Lina Inverse-san who holds nicknames like 'The One a Dragon Can't Crush even by Stepping on Her' or 'The Great Demon King's Leftovers.'"

"Oh, *that* one!"

"Wait a minute, you two."

"What is it?"

The two of them turned around, their voices in perfect harmony.

"What's with those 'no-questions-asked' nicknames!?"

"Well, but..."

"In the first place, you have no right to say things like that to someone's face the first time you meet them!"

"But, you wouldn't like strangers whispering about you behind your back, would you?"

That was Elia-san asking.

"Eh...? W-Well, of course I wouldn't like that."

"Then since we aren't strangers anymore and we aren't saying it behind your back, isn't it fine?"

"It's not fine."

"—Now, since that's settled. Lucas, let's get to the main point."

"When was it settled!? When!?"

"Yes, it was six months ago—"

Completely ignoring me, Lucas-san suddenly plunged into a monologue.

Th... these people...

"A single Black Dragon came to this town, which until then had been peaceful.

The dragon settled in the mountains to the west and, of all things, began to extort the townspeople.

'Every ten days, offer up two heads of cabbage and a large plate full of chopped pork. Otherwise, disaster will strike the town'—so it said.

At first, the townspeople were brave and did not succumb to this threat.

But soon—

Just as the dragon had said, unlucky things that could only be thought of as a curse began to happen; children fell into gutters, cows had difficult births—

—W-What's wrong!? Lina-san!? Why are you suddenly crying!?"

"...It's... it's so small...

The scale... is far too small..."

"Well... it might not be a big deal to you..."

The one who raised an accusatory voice was Elia-san.

"But! Pork is quite expensive these days!"

Sob, sob, sob, sob...

To begin with—

The reason I had volunteered for this matter was out of a certain degree of calculation.

A Black Dragon probably meant the opponent was a literal Black Dragon. There was no way a Chaos Dragon would be in a place like this.

And these Black Dragons, compared to other dragon races, are about average in strength, but they absolutely love shiny things like jewels, gold, and silver.

In other words.

For me, it was an extremely "delicious" opponent—easy to defeat and high in profit.

I could help the troubled townspeople and get the Black Dragon's treasure too!

There was no way I was going to let a job like this pass!

That was why I had spoken up, but...

What kind of things would a small-scale dragon, who demanded cabbage and pork scraps from townspeople, actually own?

However, since I had already volunteered, I couldn't say, "I'm quitting because the profit looks low."

Ignoring my internal conflict, Lucas-san continued his story nonchalantly.

"—Anyway, through one thing and another, the townspeople were forced to swallow their tears and offer up the cabbage and pork...

This has been going on for nearly half a year now!

If we keep doing as it says, this town will surely be ruined!"

...A... A town ruined by cabbage and pork scraps... just what kind of...?

"And... and..."

Lucas-san, with tears flowing profusely, said,

"The house that has to offer the cabbage and pork next... is Elia's!"

"It's okay! It's okay, Lucas!"

She also shed messy tears.

"If... if the town is saved by that... I... I..."

"Stupid! I won't let you do such a thing! I will definitely defeat that dragon!"

"It's reckless! It's like going to your death! Please, Lina-san! Don't just stand there frozen, stop Lucas!"

...Ah.

"Uuuuuuuum, Lucas-san... s-so you mean you're going to risk your life to fight a dragon to protect cabbage and pork scraps...?"

"Lina-san! No matter how irrational it may seem, for the sake of the one you love, there are times you risk your life to fight regardless of profit or loss! That is what it means to be a man!"

"...No, I wasn't asking about that..."

"Please! Lend me your strength! Let's defeat that dragon together!"

"Wait, Lucas! Why... why!?

Why do even you have to do something so dangerous!?

If it's such a dangerous job, shouldn't you just leave it to Lina-san!?"

Whoa, now.

Lucas-san gently pulled Elia-san's shoulders close as she questioned him.

"...Listen well, Elia. Of course, even I wouldn't feel a thing whether one or two wandering drifters lived or died."

Whoa, whoa, whoa.

"But the dragon is this town's problem."

...Hmm... at least he seemed to have a sense of responsibility.

"Think about it. Dragons mean piles of gold, silver, and treasure. Can you really just let a passing drifter snatch it all away right before your eyes?"

...I take back what I said...

"I understand... if you are that determined, I won't stop you."

Elia-san said, wiping her tears.

"But instead, I'm coming along too."

"Elia!?"

"I can't let you have all the delicious... I mean, dangerous experiences alone..."

"Don't be stupid! I can't let you do something that would reduce the shares... I mean, something so dangerous!"

Finally—

I understood.

These two were simply greedy.

Thus—

I didn't quite know how, but in the midst of all the vagueness, the three of us were heading toward the mountain where the dragon was.

"...By the way, Lucas-san, how big is this 'Black Dragon' anyway?"

I called out to his back as he led the way.

"I don't know... I haven't actually seen it... but why 'size'?"

"You see, the older a dragon gets, the bigger and stronger it becomes.

In other words, conversely, if you know the species, like a Black Dragon or a Red Dragon, and you know the size, you can roughly tell the age and strength of the opponent."

"I think... Dad said it was looking down with its head poking out from above the forest."

Elia-san chimed in from the side.

"Its head from above the forest!?"

I reflexively asked back.

"Yes. It was when Dad, the Mayor, and about ten others went hunting in this mountain.

It suddenly appeared and thrust that demand at them out of the blue.

That's why everyone hurried back to the town, or so I heard..."

"Hmm..."

I made a sour face.

Considering the height of the trees in this area, if its head was poking out from there...

It was quite massive for a Black Dragon.

"It looks like... it's over four hundred years old... maybe even more..."

"...Is it a tough opponent?"

"Probably," I replied.

Many dragons use spells. These days, when humans have become able to manipulate quite powerful magic, dragons can't just act big with tricks like being large, sturdy, and breathing fire.

Rumor has it that among the Golden Dragons, some can manipulate spells that even block the Dragon Slave.

Even if it wasn't that extreme, if that Black Dragon used spells to some extent and was used to fighting, it would undoubtedly be a formidable enemy.

Well, if it were just me alone, I could manage somehow, but the problem was these two.

"But if that's the case... it’s dangerous to charge in without a plan... we have to make some kind of strategy.

Hey, Lucas-san, don't go from the front, can you guide us on a route that circles around? I want to check the terrain of the area too."

In response to my words, he didn't even turn around.

"Yeah. I'll do so if I can."

.....

"No, I mean, not 'if I can,' I want you to absolutely do so."

"It’s impossible. We don't even know where the opponent lives."

Hey.

"W... Wait a minute! Does that mean we're just wandering around aimlessly right now!?"

"What do you mean 'aimlessly'! Finding the dragon is a perfectly good purpose! This is just our actions spinning their wheels!"

"Don't act so proud of it!!"

"—Now, since Lina-san is also satisfied, shall we continue our search?"

Elia-san said with a smile.

"Who was satisfied when!? ...If that's the case, I'm going home!"

"No! That's not what we agreed! I don't know if Lucas and I alone can defeat the dragon..."

She clasped both hands in front of her chest, her eyes becoming watery.

"It's okay! Elia!"

As he spoke, Lucas grabbed her hands!

"I will definitely protect you!

No matter what happens!"

...I didn't really care, but I wished they’d stop projecting a shoujo-manga background...

"...No, listen, I'm not saying I'm giving up on defeating the dragon..."

"Lucas."

"Elia."

.....

"Explosion Array."

K-Boom!

"...Can you listen to me for just a little bit?

—What I'm trying to say is this.

Instead of wandering around here aimlessly looking for the enemy's lair, it's faster to target the opponent when it comes out.

Even if we're going to snatch the gold, silver, and treasure, we can do it with more peace of mind after the dragon is defeated. Right?"

.....

"...Right?"

However, the two were completely unresponsive to my perfect plan.

They remained collapsed and no longer twitched.

...Could it be... they were hit in a bad spot... by that last Explosion Array...

"...It’ll be more peaceful if we do it after the dragon is defeated, right?"

"I... I... I see, y-you're right."

Lucas-san nodded repeatedly at my words.

I felt like a look of terror was lurking in the depths of his eyes as he looked at me, but for now, I didn't think too deeply about it.

Well, I had healed them with recovery magic, so if he was a man, I wanted him to be graceful and let what happened earlier be water under the bridge.

"B... But, the place where it comes out...?"

Elia-san asked timidly.

"—When is the next day to offer the tribute?"

"It's tomorrow night—Ah! I see!"

Elia-san clapped her hands.

"We’re going to use a pattern often found in folk songs! Lina-san will disguise herself as a cabbage and ambush the dragon..."

"Why would I disguise myself as something like that!? Instead, we'll prepare the cabbage and pork properly, hide in the shadows, and wait for the dragon to come!"

"Wait! Lina-san!"

Elia-san's face turned pale.

"Then I... I have to buy the cabbage and pork!?"

"W... Well... yeah... but if you think about the profit after defeating the dragon, something like that..."

"—Right... you're right."

She nodded with a determined expression.

"I understand. I'll do it. No matter what happens to me, I will definitely prepare the cabbage and pork!"

"Elia!"

"In exchange, forty percent of the profit will be mine..."

"No, Elia! Making you bear the cost of the tribute alone... I can't do such a cruel thing!"

Lucas-san again grabbed her hands and said something nonsensical.

"I... I will also pay half the cost!"

"Lucas! No! You mustn't be so reckless!"

...Reckless... you guys...

"What are you saying, Elia... For your sake, I don't begrudge the price of a head of cabbage and some pork scraps."

"Oh... Lucas..."

Projecting a shoujo-manga background again, the two stared at each other for a while, then slowly turned toward me and harmonized their voices perfectly.

"So, eighty percent of the profit will be ours."

...Th... these guys... just what...

And then—

The day arrived.

In the middle of the forest spreading at the foot of the mountain was a small, makeshift shrine.

That was the place where the dragon's tribute was placed.

Well, although it was called a "shrine," it was a very shabby thing—just a stand with a small roof to keep out the rain and dew.

According to Lucas-san's explanation, they didn't build walls so that the dragon could easily take the tribute, but was it just my imagination that it looked like they had simply skimped as much as possible on construction costs?

Oh. A nail was sticking out over there.

...Even a child's handicraft would be made a bit more carefully than this...

Well, anyway.

It was night. Naturally, there was no one around besides the three of us.

According to the plan, we would wait here for the dragon to appear, stealthily follow it to find its lair, and then beat it down.

At one point, there was a suggestion to get help from the townspeople, but it was obvious they would oppose it, and more than anything, the three of us perfectly agreed that we didn't want the shares to decrease, so we decided to carry out the operation by ourselves.

The moon quietly crossed the night sky.

The Black Dragon had not yet appeared.

"...It's not coming out..."

Elia-san whispered.

Lucas-san also had a look of anxiety on his face.

"Could it be... it noticed us?

By catching our scent or something... if that's the case..."

"Shh! Be quiet!"

I cut Lucas off.

"...Something... is there..."

Yes—

It wasn't a mistake. Something had definitely moved in the depths of the darkness just now.

Rustle...

A small footstep treading on the undergrowth.

Eventually—

A single shadow appeared in the darkness.

It was—not a dragon.

A black cloak that completely covered the body, and a black hood pulled down deep.

Because of the hood and the darkness, the face was completely invisible, but no matter where or who looked at it, it was "Suspicious Sorcerer A."

I could clearly sense Lucas-san and Elia-san’s agitation.

The figure in the sorcerer's garb walked up to the shrine without hesitation and, to my surprise, pulled two bags from its bosom and tossed the cabbage and pork scraps into them!

Placing the plate that had held the pork scraps back onto the stand, the figure in the sorcerer's garb walked away toward the town as if nothing had happened.

"...What... was that just now...?"

I whispered involuntarily.

"...Did you see that...?"

Elia-san nodded at the questioning Lucas-san.

"...Yes... I saw it... That was definitely..."

"Yeah... it’s the Mayor..."

Pffft.

I accidentally let out a snort next to them.

"W... Wait a minute! What does that mean?"

"In this town, there’s no one else but the Mayor who would dress in such a strange and suspicious way."

Lucas-san stated flatly.

Su... suspicious guy...

He certainly was suspicious, but...

"The Mayor here was originally a wandering sorcerer. He looked suspicious, didn't he?"

Elia-san continued.

"Wai... Wait... why is such a suspicious guy the Mayor!?"

"Everyone decided that having a Mayor like this would be 'novel.'"

Whoa, whoa...

"Just because it's 'novel' doesn't mean you can do anything!"

"That's just how the world works, isn't it?"

"Well... yeah... but more importantly, why is the Mayor in a place like this!?"

"I wouldn't know even if you asked me that!"

...That’s true.

"Anyway... let's follow him!"

Lucas-san said and jumped out from behind the bushes.

"...As I thought..."

Lucas-san whispered with a bitter face.

Just as the two had said—

When we followed the figure in the sorcerer's garb, the place we arrived at was the Mayor's house.

"But why would the Mayor intercept the tribute to the dragon...?"

"Well... anyway, I'm going to scout the situation. You two wait here."

I said and chanted the Levitation spell, landing silently near the skylight on the roof of the house.

A faint lamp light leaked from inside.

And I could hear voices talking.

I lifted the window just a little bit.

Inside were the Mayor in his sorcerer's garb and one other person.

A middle-aged woman with very sharp eyes.

"Heh. How did it go, honey?"

She said, leaning against the figure in the sorcerer's garb.

The Mayor's wife, I supposed.

"Perfect. Just as you planned."

"Fufufu. You use magic to show those stupid townspeople an illusion of a dragon that doesn't exist and make them offer cabbage and pork scraps as a tribute."

"And that helps our food budget significantly.

Even God wouldn't notice such a trick.

Truly... you are a wicked woman."

"Oh, really? I wonder just who made me such a woman...?"

"Hahahaha..."

...What...

I was speechless.

Why were these two explaining their easy-to-understand villainy at this point in time!?

I thought it might be interesting to look into that more deeply...

Just as I was thinking that—

Bam!

With a flashy sound, the door of the Mayor's house was kicked open.

"I certainly heard that story!"

That voice—

"You! Lucas! Why are you here!?"

The Mayor shouted in surprise.

Apparently, he had overheard the Mayor's talk and had jumped in because he got angry.

"Why, you ask? That's my line! Mayor, why did you commit such a heartless act!?"

"Heh! It's obvious! Because it's delicious when stir-fried with miso!"

...No one asked about that.

"You're unforgivable!"

Lucas-san drew his sword and charged in recklessly.

He was quite short-tempered.

...But this wasn't the time to be calmly watching...

The Mayor had already begun chanting a spell while jumping back.

From the type of this spell—is it illusion magic!?

Actually, I can't use this thing called illusion magic.

I just never tried to learn it.

Of course, I know that if used well, this kind of technique can be much more effective than half-baked attack magic...

For example, if you want to show a dragon to an opponent with this spell, the caster strongly envisions the form of a dragon in their heart, amplifies and manifests that image with a spell, and sends it into the opponent's head.

As a result, the person the spell was cast on can clearly "see" the dragon, but of course, the dragon is not visible to the caster or a third party.

This is it. The reason I disliked illusion magic.

In other words, from an outsider's perspective, there’s no excitement at all—actually, it just looks stupid.

For example, the battle unfolding below this window right now.

The Mayor, completing his spell while retreating over chairs and tables.

"Take this, Lucas! My illusion magic!

Come forth, Black Dragon!"

At this time, the image of a giant black dragon should have been clearly reflected in Lucas's eyes.

Of course, I couldn't see it.

"Stupid!"

Lucas-san shouted.

"Who do you think would be intimidated by a dragon they know is an illusion!!"

He charged straight toward the Mayor without caring.

But—

Thwack!

A single, very resonant sound.

Thud.

Lucas-san took a direct hit from a vase to his head and collapsed.

Let me explain.

The Mayor had shown the illusion of a dragon to Lucas-san after declaring it beforehand, and at the same time, he had thrown a nearby vase at him.

Naturally, he did so reading that Lucas-san would ignore the dragon's illusion and charge straight ahead.

In other words, this time the Mayor used illusion magic as a means of distraction.

...Well, I can give this kind of explanation because I know the situation, but if I were to record simply what I saw, it would be "Lucas-san ran head-first into a vase thrown by the Mayor and was knocked out."

Frankly speaking, this was nothing but pure stupidity.

"Ah! Lucas!"

Elia-san hurried over.

She suddenly looked up at me with a sharp gaze.

"Lina-san! Don't just stand there and watch, come down and fight too!"

...Ahhh!

"What!? Is there another one!?"

The Mayor hurriedly looked up at me.

...Geez... Elia-san... you just ruined everything...

I was planning to wait for the Mayor to lower his guard and then launch a flying kick or something from above, but that plan was now ruined.

Fine, if it's come to this, I've got no choice but to use a frontal attack!

"Yah!"

I jumped from the skylight into the house.

When I landed, the Mayor had already begun chanting a spell.

I also hurried and chanted a spell. But—

He was faster!

"Vision!"

The moment the Mayor spoke the "Word of Power"—

The area around me was covered by an endless prairie—

Naturally—

Needless to say, this was illusion magic. Even if it looked like a prairie to my eyes, this was still inside the Mayor's house, and the Mayor and Elia-san should have been nearby.

For now, I also released the spell I had been chanting.

"Fire Arrow!"

I fired it toward where I thought the Mayor had been just a moment ago.

Thud!

The sound of the Fire Arrow hitting something.

"! How could you!"

A woman's voice from the right. It was the Mayor's wife's.

There!

I jumped toward the direction of the voice and presence and threw a random kick.

Bam!

A heavy, soft response! Followed by the sound of something falling.

Apparently, I hit the target.

As for the Fire Arrow, unfortunately, it missed. If I had taken down the Mayor with that, this illusion should have disappeared.

—Where is he?—

I closed my eyes and searched for the presence around me.

The wind howled.

I hurriedly jumped away from the spot. Behind me at an angle, the sound of pottery or something breaking. Followed by footsteps. And—a presence!

"There!!"

With a shout, I threw a punch! A certain response, and a scream!

"Pigyaaaaa!?"

...Oh!?

That scream... could it be Elia-san!?

...Apparently, I had mistakenly punched her out.

Well, what's done is done.

Every human makes mistakes.

In this situation, if I could use something like Explosion Array or Burst Flare, it would be over easily, but unfortunately, those can't be used on a wooden floor like this.

The battle fell into a stalemate.

Since the opponent was also manipulating this spell, they couldn't chant another spell, but on the other hand, if they launched a direct attack, there was a high possibility of me counterattacking.

A moment of breathtaking tension.

Another moment.

One more moment.

...I got bored.

Fine! Since it’s come to this, I should finish it quickly!

I searched the area with my hands.

One thing that felt like a chair was nearby.

Alright!

I suddenly began chanting a spell.

"Darkness beyond twilight,

crimson beyond the flow of blood—"

"D... Dragon Slave!?"

A voice from diagonally in front of me.

"Found you!"

I threw the chair in my hand toward the direction of the voice!

Crash!

With a very lively sound, the vast prairie that had spread across my vision vanished.

Inside the messy house, I was the only one standing.

"Let me ask you—just one thing."

As he was being led away by the townspeople, the Mayor stopped for a moment and asked me.

"If—if I hadn't made a sound at that time, what on earth were you planning to do?"

"That's a s-e-c-r-e-t."

The Mayor's face turned pale at my smiling answer.

"You! You were actually going to use the Dragon Slave for real, weren't you!"

The townspeople led the Mayor away as he made a huge fuss.

"—Thank you very much. Lina-san."

Lucas-san said and bowed his head.

"Thanks to you, this town was also saved. And—it's modest, but I've prepared a small token of gratitude.

Please, accept it."

And then—

The next day, I left the town.

With ten heads of cabbage, the gift from the townspeople, stuffed into my backpack...

Sob, sob, sob, sob...

(The Vegetable Battle: End)

Conspiracy of the Sorcerers' Guild

"Oh, you've arrived! Welcome!"

The person greeting Naga and me at the entrance of the Sorcerers' Association was a bearded middle-aged man, flanked by several of his attendant sorcerers. This man was none other than Mr. Hammingham, the Council Chairman of the Kuruasal City Sorcerers' Association. In truth, this town's Association was currently in the middle of total chaos.

"Just what exactly is going on here?" I asked.

The man replied to my question with, "Hmm, I take it you've heard a bit of the story?"

"Hmph. Only the barest minimum, literally," Naga said.

I followed with a small nod. "Only that a rebellion broke out here."

It was true—a while ago, the Vice-Chairman of this town's Association had led a revolt. Chairman Hammingham had used a spell called *Vision*—which transmits images and voices over long distances—to inform Sorcerers' Associations nationwide. Considering this the greatest scandal since the Association's founding, various branches had gathered every available sorcerer and traveling mage they could find and sent them toward Kuruasal City (or so I assumed). Naga and I were two of those mages.

"Still, you were fast. You're the first to arrive," Chairman Hammingham said as he led us deeper into the building.

"Well, yeah. We happened to be in a nearby town. ...But honestly, why did this Vice-Chairman person start a rebellion in the first place?" I asked as I walked behind him.

He replied in an incredibly light tone, "Well, it's not really that big of a deal. Apparently, he didn't like the fact that I used my position as Chairman to line my own pockets, or that I took liberties with the pretty young apprentices and my subordinates' wives."

Whack!

My kick connected squarely with the back of the Chairman's head.

"Ow! What was that for all of a sudden!?" the Chairman cried, picking himself up as if he hadn't taken much actual damage.

"Don't 'what was that' me! Anyone would start a rebellion if you did all that!"

At my words, however, the Chairman puffed out his chest grandly. "What are you talking about!? Isn't the abuse of power and the blurring of public and private interests the very duty of a man in power!?"

...Looking at the world at large, I occasionally felt like there might be a law to that effect, but in reality, I didn't think such a thing existed. ...Probably...

"Hmph! You're still naive! You're supposed to do those things more secretly so you don't get

caught!"

Naga, why were you giving him pointers? The Chairman laughed off her remark.

"Don't make me laugh! Why on earth would I need to be sneaky!? I am the most 'right' person in the world!"

...What was he, a defiant delinquent? "Exactly how are you right!?"

"You people clearly haven't heard the phrase 'Justice lies with me'!"

...This... this guy...

"...Hmph... You're vastly mistaken!" I shouted, pointing a finger directly at the Chairman's face. *Point!* "That phrase exists solely for me!"

"Why are you competing with him on the same level!?" Naga interjected from the side.

"In any case, defying me is the height of insolence! Men! Get rid of them!"

At his command, mages and mercenaries came swarming out from nowhere. Judging by their shifty eyes and rough demeanors, they were likely wandering thugs hired with gold. ...Well, looking at them, they didn't seem like much...

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! This is truly laughable! No matter how many you gather, do you really think this level of riff-raff can stand against the Great Naga the White Serpent!?"

As Naga let out her overconfident laugh, I leaned in and whispered into her ear.

"...We're retreating for now..."

"Hmph! Are you intimidated by this trash, Lina!?"

"I'll tell you why later! Just run!"

I stated this flatly and took off running without waiting for an answer.

"W-Wait!? Wait for me!" Naga scrambled after me.

"Don't let them get away! Pursue them! Go! Finish them off!"

"YEAH!"

At the Chairman's command, the men let out a chorus of vulgar shouts and gave chase.

It wasn't even that far from the main entrance. The two of us exited the Sorcerers' Association building quite easily. Then, turning around, I let loose a spell!

"Fireball!"

Kaboom!

My Fireball, with its power somewhat dialed back, impacted right at the entrance we had just exited, scattering smoke and flames all over the place. That should have been enough to stall and blind the pursuers.

"...Why did we run, Lina!?" Naga asked me, not slowing her pace. "You should have just blown those guys away with a single spell! You're usually so good at that, aren't you!?"

"...Listen, Naga. It would have been easy to blast a Dragon Slave or two back there. But if I had, and a few of those guys survived, imagine them reporting to the other Associations via *Vision* that 'Lina and Naga sided with the rebels and assassinated the Chairman.' From tomorrow on, we'd be top-tier fugitives. Even you don't want to pick a fight with every Sorcerers' Association in the country, right!?"

At my words, Naga momentarily lost her voice. "...B-But Lina, then what are we supposed to do!?"

"First, we have to somehow convince the Associations nationwide that Chairman Hammingham is the one at fault. To do that..."

I cut myself off and stopped dead in my tracks. Beside me, Naga stopped as well. We were in a corner of a town street. Likely due to the recent rebellion, there weren't many people around. The silence lasted for only a moment.

"—Why don't you come out? I don't know who you are, though."

I spoke while turning around. After a slight pause, a man emerged from behind a roadside tree. He looked to be in his early twenties. His clothes were those of an ordinary townsman, but...

"...Hi... my name is Rail..."

He spoke in an incredibly laid-back tone, despite the dire situation. For now, he didn't seem hostile, but he didn't exactly seem reliable either.

"...Actually, I've been watching you for a while... and I have a proposal... would you like to join the rebel army with us?"

The place Naga and I were led to was the back room of a perfectly ordinary general store tucked away in a corner of town. Judging by the size, it had probably been a warehouse or something originally. It was now neatly tidied up, and about ten men and women were inside.

"...This... happens to be one of our bases," Rail explained to us after the introductions and explanations of the situation were over. "...As you can see, the Vice-Chairman isn't here... let me explain why..."

"Yeah, I pretty much get it," I said, cutting him off. "There's no guarantee that we aren't spies sent by Hammingham. So you can't let us meet the Vice-Chairman or tell us where he is, right?"

"...Yes... that's exactly it..." Rail replied with a cool face.

"That doesn't matter right now. The problem is what we do next."

"...Well... in our plan... we're waiting for a chance to..."

"Rejected."

I shot him down without a second thought. "Listen. Think about it. As I said before, the Chairman has already used *Vision* to request help from the other Associations. To the people coming to help who don't know the situation, the Chairman is justice and we are

evil. Of course, many people probably dislike the Chairman's personality, but I don't think they'd defect to our side just for that... In other words, the more time passes, the more the advantage shifts to his side."

"...I see..." Rail said in his relaxed tone, his expression not changing one bit. "...Then... what should we do...?"

...This guy... he hasn't thought of anything...

"We take action as soon as possible—preferably right now—and seize the Sorcerers' Association headquarters. Then, we use the *Vision* spell to show the other Associations proof that the Chairman is the one in the wrong. That's the only way."

I stated my case. *Vision* is basically a communication spell where two mages in separate locations synchronize their minds to exchange images and sounds. No matter how many days it would take a fast horse to cover the distance, this spell allowed for interaction without any time lag—an incredibly convenient thing. However, there were problems. Even if I said "synchronizing minds" lightly, not every mage could do it with just anyone. Compatibility was a factor. That was why barriers were created to amplify the power of *Vision*. Using these, it was possible to unilaterally send messages to similar barriers in other locations—in short, the *Vision* rooms installed in Sorcerers' Associations everywhere.

If Naga and I had felt like it, we could have used the momentum from when I kicked the Chairman to occupy the *Vision* room... but even if we contacted other Associations, it would be pointless unless we had something to convince them that Chairman Hammingham was the root cause.

"...Oh... I see..." Rail said, clapping his hands after a considerable delay. "...That might be a fairly good idea..."

"—Rather, it's the only move we have."

"...I see... then I'll consult with everyone immediately, and once we've reached a consensus, I'll go consult with the Vice-Chairman, and if he gives the okay, I'll gather everyone from the other hideouts to consult with them..."

"Aaaagh! Why are you being so leisurely!? If we're doing it, it's now! Right now! Even with just the people here, we're launching an attack on the Sorcerers' Association! ...There are plenty of people here who have been directly victimized by Chairman Hammingham or know of his daily conduct, right!? We'll have them testify to the other Associations one after another via *Vision*. ...Well, I don't think the Associations will suddenly take our side just with that, but at the very least, they'll stop attacking us unilaterally and move to investigate the truth. Once Hammingham's deeds are out in the open, the victory is ours even if we do nothing else."

"...Oh... I see..." Rail clapped his hands again. "...Then, I'll consult with everyone, and if we decide on that, I'll go to the Vice-Chairman and consult about us attacking immediately by ourselves..."

"Gaaaaah! Enough with the consultations! Enough!"

"...But... even if you say 'just us,' there are only about ten of us... can we really occupy the Sorcerers' Association with this few people...?"

"I have a plan. First, one of us pretends to betray the rebels for money or something, goes to the Chairman, and tells him 'the rebel hideout is here,' giving him some fake location as far away as possible. ...Well, Chairman Hammingham probably won't believe it easily, but he’s bound to send some of his forces there. By doing that, we’ll reduce the enemy numbers even a little bit, and then all of us will attack at once! Naga and I will handle the rest!"

"...I see..." Rail clapped his hands.

"Don't consult about it," I warned him. Rail gave me a sad look.

"Hmph! Then the role of spreading that false information—I, Naga the White Serpent, shall take it!"

"...You’re going to do it...? You...?"

"What’s with that... Lina... that look of disgust...?"

"...No... nothing..." I vaguely muttered. Naturally, I had immense anxiety about leaving such a crucial role to someone like Naga... but there was no one else better suited for it. It was too unrealistic for people who had gone so far as to start a rebellion to suddenly turn for money, and I had just escaped after kicking the back of the Chairman’s head. Naga had been there too, of course, but she hadn't directly hit him. If she said "my companion did it on her own," it might not be fully believed, but it would serve as an excuse. In this plan, the Chairman didn't need to fully believe the fake info, but it would be problematic if he didn't believe it at all. Plus, given Naga's appearance as a wicked sorceress, the setup of 'defecting for personal gain' had quite a lot of realism to it.

"—That’s true—Naga, you're the only one I can entrust this role to!"

"Hmph! Naturally! Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!" Naga let out a loud, boastful laugh. ...Well, fine. If she failed, it would just end with Naga getting in trouble... "Then, I’ll explain the details of the operation immediately."

"...Do you think it'll work...?" Rail, crouching beside me, asked in a tone that didn't sound particularly worried. We were on the roof of a certain building. From here, we had a clear view of the Sorcerers' Association. It had been quite some time since Naga had disappeared inside its entrance. When she was negotiating with the guard at the door, I could hear that high-pitched laugh carried by the wind, and since she had been guided inside, it seemed she hadn't been exposed immediately. Well, as long as Naga spoke her lines according to my script, I didn't think things would go too poorly... However, villains connected to power like Chairman Hammingham were often quite adept at things like conspiracies and schemes. I couldn't afford to take him too lightly...

"...Oh... someone’s coming out..." Rail said in his relaxed manner. Sure enough—I could see a significant number of people emerging from the Sorcerers' Association entrance. Among them, I could see Chairman Hammingham. "...It seems he completely believed Naga’s words and has set out for a total offensive..."

...For an enemy, he was quite an unthinking old man...

"...Still... I wonder how someone like that managed to become Chairman..." I whispered in amazement. Rail replied with a pleasant smile, "...Well... it’s not really all that strange...

after all, we're short on talent around here..."

...I wished he wouldn't make such a sad boast with a pleasant face... Regardless, the group led by the Chairman let out a collective war cry and began a scattered advance.

"—It’s finally time—" At my words, Rail nodded like a spineless sea lily.

The infiltration was anticlimactic. We let Hammingham’s group pass, waited a while, and then charged into the Sorcerers' Association headquarters, but the place was almost entirely empty. Of course, there were sentries at the entrance, but I knocked them out with my spells without a word. The group then swarmed into the lobby in a single surge. And then—at that moment!

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! So you've made it this far! Lina Inverse!" A familiar voice rang out!

"Naga!"

The front door opened with a heavy sound. A black shadow stood there. Naga the White Serpent, as if I needed to say it. Several mages were standing by her side—likely Chairman Hammingham's subordinates. I put a smile on my face and said, "...Naga, you can stop the act now."

At my words, the mages beside Naga turned pale.

"...Hmph..." Naga smiled slightly, brushing her hair back. "I wonder what on earth you’re talking about?"

...Wait. She pointed a finger directly at me.

"Listen well, Lina! I’m sure everyone has forgotten by now, but I am your greatest and strongest lifelong rival! And above all, a hundred gold coins are much thicker than friendship!"

...Hey...

"...Oh... it looks like Naga-san really did defect because she was tempted by the money..." Rail said in his usual relaxed tone.

"It’s a duel! Lina!"

...Hey now...

"Here I go! Ice Arrow!"

"Ugh! Void Wall!"

I barely managed to use a 'wind' defensive spell to protect myself and Rail's group behind me from the spell Naga had fired without hesitation.

"Rail! Leave this place to me and go on ahead!"

"...Right... first I'll consult with everyone..."

"You don't need to consult! Just go!"

"...Understood... then, we'll head on ahead—"

...A dictator is a problem, but people like this are also a problem.

"Hmph! No looking away during a fight!" Naga shouted as she fired her next spell. *Freeze Arrow*! I sprinted toward Naga while chanting a spell. A bluish orb of light grazed past me.

Creak...

The sound of something groaning behind me. The *Freeze Arrow* had impacted where I had been standing just a moment ago. The powerful cold it released created a temperature difference that made the walls and floor creak. After confirming the sound, I released my spell.

"Fireball!"

"Hmph! Naive!" The moment Naga spoke—

Kaboom!

My Fireball exploded at her feet! ...Well... I kept the firepower to a minimum, so I didn't think it would kill her... When the smoke cleared—several scorched and groaning mages were there. And—

"That's why I said it—you're naive."

"Naga! How!?" She was completely undamaged. Not even a scorch mark was on her cloak.

"Hmph! Lina, I knew you would definitely fire a fire-based spell at that timing. That's why, as I fired the *Freeze Arrow*, I began chanting a fire resistance spell!"

"Th... That can't be!? Naga read my pattern!?" I shouted in genuine surprise.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! You seem quite surprised!"

"...N-Naga... you actually have the ability to learn!!"

"Praise me a little!"

"But I truly didn't think you'd read my moves... You really are my rival..."

At my words, Naga put her hands on her hips. "Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! It seems you've finally had to admit my true power, Lina Inverse! ...Hmph. But now you understand. I, Naga the White Serpent..."

"Explosion Array."

Boom!

You're ten years too early. At the very least, if you want to beat me, you should do something about your personality that sends you soaring into the clouds with just a little bit of flattery. I went over to the completely knocked-out Naga and shook her awake.

"U... u... n..." Naga let out a strangely girly sound and slowly opened her eyes. The moment her gaze met mine, her body stiffened.

"—Well?" I asked coldly. She managed to feign composure as she said—

"—Hmph. Let's end the performance there. So, Lina, what's the situation?"

...This... this woman... I’m going to beat her down for real one of these days!

"...Hi... you're finally here..." Rail and his group were just coming out of the room when Naga and I reached the *Vision* room.

"How was it?"

"...It seems they've decided to send an investigation team to verify the facts..."

"Hmph. Isn't that great? It's all thanks to me," Naga said shamelessly, though I had no idea where she got that idea.

"...Hi... we can relax for now... I'll report to the Vice-Chairman immediately, and then I'll report to everyone else..."

"This isn't the time to be leisurely celebrating!" I said, dampening the mood for the (apparently) happy Rail. "Chairman Hammingham and his group should be back soon. We have to leave here and go into hiding until the Association's investigation team arrives. It’ll be a disaster if we run into them."

"...Hi... you're right... then everyone, let's hurry and escape..."

However, it seemed the world wasn't kind enough to let the story end there. By the time we reached the entrance—Chairman Hammingham and his group were already lined up in front of it.

"—Ju... Just what is the meaning of this!? Naga, was it!?" the Chairman shouted, his face red with rage.

"Oh, it's simple. I only pretended to sell out Lina and the others to feed you false information. ...Hmph, did you really think that a hundred gold coins could buy a deep bond of friendship and firm trust!?"

"...I wonder who it was that completely lost themselves for those hundred gold coins and attacked us...?" Naga pretended not to hear my murmur, but I didn't miss the single bead of sweat rolling down her cheek.

"...D-Damn you! Then give the money back!"

"N-No way!"

"If you won't, then side with me! I'll give you another hundred coins if you do!"

"...Hmm..."

"Why are you hesitating!? Naga! He’s a villain anyway! There’s a law that says you don't have to return money borrowed from a villain!"

"Hmph. Now that you mention it, there certainly was a law like that."

"No, there isn't!" The Chairman's group and even Rail’s group shouted in unison.

"S-Shut up! More importantly, Chairman Hammingham! Just now, from the Association's *Vision* room, I broadcast your numerous evil deeds to all the Sorcerers' Associations nationwide! In a few days, Association investigators will arrive—and that will be the end of you! Be prepared; you have no tomorrow!"

"—Wh-What!? Whaaaaaat!? ...D-Damn you! I won't forgive this! If it’s come to this, I’ll finish off at least you!"

"...Lina-san... do you know phrases like 'adding fuel to the fire' or 'counterproductive'...?"

"S-Shut up! Anyway, Rail! Leave this to Naga and me, and you guys escape out the back!"

"...Right. We'll do that," Rail and his group said, retreating back into the building.

"I won't let you escape! Men, attack!"

At Hammingham’s command, the mercenaries charged toward us. The sorcerer types stayed put and began chanting spells. Truly, as a motley crew, they had no coordination whatsoever. —That said, the situation was a bit unfavorable. Since the distance to the enemy was too close, I couldn't use very large spells. I had to stall them somehow and create distance...

"Naga! Get out of the way!" I shouted as I chanted a spell.

"Hmph! I know!" Naga replied and also began chanting. The mercenaries were right in front of us!

"Explosion Array!"

Boom!

My spell blasted away five or six of the men who were closing in. Intimidated by that, the followers stopped their movement.

"Now! Naga! To the back..." As I spoke and turned around, I saw Naga knocked out by my own spell! Aaaaaagh! I told you to get out of the way! You didn't understand at all! This is bad! It's a disadvantage! Even though the mercenaries had stopped, it was impossible to counterattack with spells while protecting Naga. On top of that, the mages flanking the Chairman had already finished chanting their spells! Little Lina is in a piiiinch! This was no time to be saying things like that!

"Ugh! What are you afraid of!? Mercenaries!" But the one who broke this brief silence was Chairman Hammingham. "Getting scared after a single spell! Fine! If it’s come to this! Mages! Finish them off with your spells!"

"...B-But Chairman! If we use spells now, our own soldiers will also be hurt..." the mage standing next to him said.

"Shut up, shut up! Who cares about a bunch of cheap mercenaries!? It's more convenient since I won't have to pay them! I don't care, just do them all together!"

"...What..."

"WHAT!?" It was the mercenaries who flew into a rage.

"Ch-Chairman! That kind of thing..."

"I told you to shut up! People who have no talent other than chanting spells should just shut up and listen to what I say! ...Wait... hey... you guys...?"

By the time Chairman Hammingham noticed everyone's hostile glares, it was already too

late. Thus—right before my eyes, the First Annual "Anyone Can Join" Chairman Hammingham Beat-Down Festival began, with both mercenaries and mages participating...

"...Hi... Lina-san... thank you very much..." It was Rail, of course, who spoke in his relaxed voice. It was the day after Hammingham had been defeated in the confusion. "...Thanks to you, this Association was also safely saved..."

"It’s fine. More importantly, where's the reward?" I asked with a pleasant smile.

"...There isn't any such thing..." Rail replied with a pleasant smile. My smile stiffened. ...He... he’s tough... But well... it’s not like we had made an actual promise... ...Fine... I'll give up on getting money from him...

"—That’s right, Naga, you got a hundred gold coins from Hammingham, didn't you?"

At my pleasant question, Naga's face twitched. "N-No way! I’m not giving this to you!"

"Wh-What!? I’m the one who came up with that plan in the first place! I’m not saying give me all of it, but at least split it half-and-half!"

"That's that, and this is this! This is the result of my acting ability!"

—Well, as you can see. Naga and my argument continued endlessly until the next day—until Naga realized she had dropped the bag of gold coins somewhere...

(Conspiracy of the Sorcerers' Guild: End)

The Beast Tamer's Melancholy

It all began with a rumbling in the earth and a chorus of screams.

"Hm?"

Naga and I turned around casually—and in the next instant:

"Gwaaaaaaaah!"

I frantically cast Levitation to float into the air. Below me was a massive animal stampede. Cows, horses, dogs, and cats. There were even chickens and rats. For whatever reason, it seemed every animal in town was charging forward at once.

Unable to comprehend the situation, the townspeople simply screamed and ran in circles; children were crying, stalls were being crushed, dogs were barking, and Naga was being trampled flat...

...Looks like she didn't get away in time...

After a short while, once the wave of the "Great March" had passed, nothing remained but piles of rubble and a flattened Naga.

"Hmph. That was a close one."

As she spoke, she suddenly popped back up.

"Hey—wait a minute! Naga! Why are you unharmed!? How!?"

I deactivated my spell and landed on the ground.

"Why, you ask?" Naga gave a small, condescending laugh and flicked her hair back. "Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! Don't make me laugh, Lina Inverse! Did you really think something of that level could kill Naga the White Serpent!?"

"...Well... I suppose you wouldn't die from just that..."

She put her hands on her hips and puffed out her chest pointlessly far. "Hmph! I was dodging every single one of those animals' hooves by a hair's breadth! ...Though I suppose such movements would be invisible to an amateur eye..."

"Then what are all those hoofprints all over your body?"

"Ugh..." Naga groaned quietly, then abruptly turned her head away. "Anyway... I wonder what that was all about..."

"Oh. That? I did that."

Startled by the sudden voice, we turned to find a single young girl standing there.

"Now then, care to explain yourself?"

Naga spoke to her after draining a full mug of ale. We were at a certain eatery, a short distance away from where the stampede occurred.

"Well... I don't know where to start... basically, I'm being targeted," the girl said while devouring a Lunch Set A (with drink). She looked to be about sixteen or seventeen. Her hair was a light chestnut brown, cut into a short bob. She was a beauty with a somewhat slender build.

...But I'm still losing in the chest department...

"My name is Milly. For a while now, some weird people have been chasing me. Today, they suddenly surrounded me in town. So, I made all the animals in town go wild to use the chaos as a distraction..."

"W-Wait a second!?" I interjected as she spoke so nonchalantly. "Making the town's animals stampede... you don't mean... are you a Beastmaster?"

"Exactly." She nodded with a pose.

I was momentarily speechless.

Beastmaster.

It’s not a very common profession, so I’ll provide a brief explanation. To begin with, being a Beastmaster isn't something you can achieve through magical study alone. It requires a "talent" found in only one in every few tens of thousands of people, combined with a certain level of magical skill and ability. Only when those align can someone become a Beastmaster.

It hasn't been clearly explained what this "talent" actually is, but it's said to be a natural affinity with animals. Of course, anyone has one or two animals they get along with, and with spells, you can control them by the dozen.

However, people called Beastmasters are on a completely different level. They can control every kind of animal across an entire region. Apparently, to control common animals within a small area, they don't even need to chant a spell. Naturally, their numbers are extremely low; it's said there are barely ten people in the world who can truly be called Beastmasters.

I, for one, was seeing a real one for the first time.

"So, do you have any idea why you're being targeted?"

"Isn't it obvious? It's fear," Milly said firmly and clearly.

"...Fear...?" I frowned.

"Yes! Fear! To ordinary people, someone who uses a power they can't understand is terrifying. It’s no wonder they feel instinctive dread. I almost wish... I didn't have this power...

...Ah... Beastmaster! The talent Heaven bestowed upon me... With just a thought, countless beasts gather at my feet and prostrate themselves! To the commoners who possess no power, it must seem like the power of a god! For mere mortals to bare their fangs at someone like me is truly laughable! Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

...She’s dangerous... this one’s dangerous too...

"...O-Or perhaps some country is after you," I suggested.

"What do you mean?" Milly tilted her head slightly.

...Looking at her gestures, she seems like a normal person...

"Just think about it. Consider how powerful a Beastmaster is. It wouldn't be strange at all if some warmongering king or lord set their sights on you, wanting to capture and exploit you."

"Hmph. I wondered what you were going to say..." Naga chuckled. "You're still thinking too shallowly, Lina! No matter how much of a Beastmaster she is, it's not like she can control Wyverns or Dragons... at most, her limit is probably bears, wolves, or tigers. No matter how many of those gather, they can't match a single powerful attack spell! If that's the case, it’s much more useful to train mages than to go through the trouble of capturing a Beastmaster!"

I couldn't help but sigh. ...I wonder which of us is thinking shallowly...

"...Then let me ask you, Naga. If you were sleeping and suddenly countless rats flooded into your room, what would you do?"

"A foolish question." Naga puffed out her chest again. "I'd obviously panic and make a pointless scene!"

"Don't be proud of that! ...Anyway... it’s true that gathering a bunch of animals doesn't provide the same direct offensive power as a strong attack spell. But it’s perfect for distracting enemies or for assassinations. Plus, since it’s hard to tell who the caster is, it’s much safer for the one attacking...

—I believe you can control animals within the same building without even needing to amplify it with a spell, right, Milly?"

"Yes. For that much, I only need to think it. In that case, there is no way to see through a Beastmaster. This is the ultimate! Truly invincible! Given only to those chosen by God..."

"Yes, yes. I get it, so let’s get back to the story."

"—Well, jokes aside. I have a favor to ask you two."

...The look in her eyes didn't seem like she was joking...

"From what I can see, you're both mages. Since you're traveling mages despite being women, you must be pretty capable, right? So, I want to hire you as guards. I don't know when those people will attack again, and animals don't always come right when I call them. ...Let’s see, if you could just take me as far as the Raltigue border."

"Why the 'border'?" Naga asked.

"I figured even those guys wouldn't chase me once I cross the border," Milly replied.

It was true. If the ones targeting her were from some country or territory as I suspected, crossing the border would definitely make things difficult for them.

"Hmm—"

It didn't sound like a very profitable job, and she seemed like a troublesome person, but I was curious to see a Beastmaster’s techniques up close.

"—So, what's the reward?"

The amount she quoted wasn't bad at all.

"—Looks like we have company."

I stopped walking while the three of us were traversing a path across a canyon. The road was wide enough for several carriages to pass side-by-side, but to our left was a towering cliff, and to our right was a straight drop-off.

"Is it the pursuers!?" Milly asked, her face stiffening. I nodded.

"...I took this route to throw them off... but it seems that backfired..."

"Liar," Naga whispered at my remark.

"...Who are you calling a liar..." I whispered back.

"You, Lina. Hmph. You chose a course where it's easy for enemies to ambush us on purpose, didn't you?"

Gulp.

That was a sharp observation, but I feigned ignorance. "Why would I do something like that?"

"Hmph... knowing you, you’d rather choose the path that ends things quickly rather than just running forever. ...And you’re probably planning to knock out the pursuers and 'requisition' your travel expenses from them, aren't you?"

"...Hmph... I guess I can't hide it from you... but actually, that’s not all. Think about it. If those assassins were sent by some lord, we could squeeze them for evidence, report it to the King, and get a huge reward! Or better yet, 'If you don't want the King to find out...' we could threaten the person themselves first, squeeze them for all they're worth, and then report them to the King to get the reward too. It’s a nice double-dip strategy."

"I see!" Naga clapped her hands. "If the mastermind behind this is a King, then we can leak it to all the surrounding countries! ...We'd be rich in no time!"

"Exactly!"

"Cha-cha-cha! Lucky!"

"...What are you two doing...?" Milly watched us.

...Ack! I snapped back to reality at Milly's words. But—

Rumble.

At that moment, countless rocks, large and small, were already tumbling down toward us from above!

"Waaaaaaaah!"

Our screams harmonized as the three of us frantically jumped out of the way. I had sensed the presence of the pursuers on top of the cliff, but I didn't think they’d just start dropping boulders without a word.

"Hey, Lina! I feel like this isn't how things were supposed to go!?"

"Never mind that! For now, let's just get out of here!"

I started running. I could have used a spell to fly away, but even with the highly mobile Levitation, if they dropped a rock the moment I took off, it would be over. I could deflect arrows with a wind barrier, but a falling boulder is a different story.

—Wait, could this be—?

It was exactly as I feared. A short distance ahead of us: over a dozen masked figures!

...Looks like we fell right into their trap.

"Milly, I have a request."

I whispered in her ear so the pursuers couldn't hear. "I'll distract them and buy time, so use your ability to call some animals! Just one or two strong ones, so we don't get caught in the crossfire!"

"Got it!" She replied and began chanting a small spell under her breath. Apparently, that was the spell to amplify her power.

—Well, of course—

To be honest, I didn't need her help; if I used my own spells, I could have cleared the area easily. I only said that because I wanted to see her power. For now, I just needed to buy time...

"What is the meaning of this!?" One of the masked men stepped forward. He was holding a sword, but his demeanor made him look like a complete amateur.

"Haven't you heard? From the girl behind you!" He pointed toward Milly.

"She says she has no idea why she's being targeted!"

"Hmph! To not even realize the weight of your own sins... fine... then I shall tell you! The fact that she is a Beastmaster! That itself is the reason!"

"What does that mean!?"

"Humph... in short..."

Whoosh!

A sudden gust of wind drowned out the man's voice.

"They're here, Lina," Milly said quietly.

It was—a single giant bird.

"A Roc!?"

I looked up at it, holding my wind-tossed hair back. To put it bluntly, it looked like a skinny eagle scaled up to the size of a Wyvern.

"Wh-What is that!?"

"It's a Roc!"

"I can see that!"

"You're the one who asked!"

The pursuers were in chaos, shouting over one another. Amidst the gale from its wings and the swirling dust, Milly’s voice rang out.

"I've been waiting for you! Now! Show me your power!"

Krrrooooooooh!

Letting out a cry like a wolf’s howl, the massive Roc descended! Its beak flashed!

"Eeeeyaaaaah!"

And then came Naga's scream! Hey, hey!

"Aaaah! No! She's definitely the most suspicious one here, but she’s an ally!"

At Milly's words, the Roc finally stopped pecking at Naga.

"In that case, use your talons!"

I wasn't sure what "in that case" meant, but at Milly's command, the Roc let out a loud cry.

And then!

"Hee-aaaaah!"

...Why are you the one being carried away, Milly...?

No matter how big it was, I guess a bird is still a bird-brain.

"Damn it! She got away!?" one of the masked men shouted.

...Did that look intentional to you?

"Tch... towards that mountain! After them!"

Pointing in the direction the Roc flew, the group ran off, completely ignoring us.

"What should we do, Lina?"

"We follow them! ...Wait, Naga, are you okay!? After being pecked by a Roc!?"

"Of course I'm not okay," Naga said, scratching the back of her head. "That was a bit of a surprise, even for me."

...Surprise...

To summarize everything with that one word is so very Naga.

"Anyway... we have to find her before those guys do!" I clenched my fists tight. "I haven't even received the advance payment yet!"

The pursuit was incredibly difficult. The slopes were steep, there were plenty of cliffs, and Naga kept tumbling down them. Even if I used Levitation to search from the air, there were too many large trees in the way. Unless Milly was climbing a tree, searching from the sky was nearly impossible.

In that case, there was only one thing left to do: search on foot.

"I'm tired. I'm hungry. This is a pain..."

"Hey, Lina! Can't you be a little quieter!?"

"There are things every human can and can't do!"

Naga let out a long sigh at my answer and continued walking in silence. ...But with this method, the pursuers definitely have the advantage since they have more people. I wanted to find her before they did...

"...Wait..." I clapped my hands.

"What is it, Lina?"

"If the Roc flew this way, doesn't that mean its nest is around here?"

"—And?"

"So, we find the Roc's nest. Milly is bound to be nearby!"

"I see. ...So, Lina, do you know what a Roc's nest looks like?"

"I don't... but it’s a nest for a bird that big. And it doesn't rain much around here... the nest is probably out in the open, so we should be able to find it easily from the air!"

Without waiting for Naga's reply, I began chanting Levitation.

As I expected, it wasn't long before I found the Roc's nest.

"—She should be around here."

I looked around. Because of the Roc's nest sprawling overhead, the area was quite dim, and visibility wasn't great.

"Heeeey! Milly-saaaan!"

"W-Wait, Lina! If you shout like that, what if the pursuers hear you!?"

"It’ll be too hard to find her ourselves in this situation. It's much more logical to let her know 'allies are here' so she comes out herself."

"...Logical, huh..." For some reason, Naga gave me a cold stare.

"...W-What’s with that look?"

"Your 'logic' usually leaves out common sense..."

"I don't want to hear about common sense from you!"

"What’s that supposed to mean!?"

"Look in a mirror! The answer is right there!"

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! I didn't expect to be told to 'look in a mirror' by someone with a chest like a flat plain!"

"Wh-!?"

And so, our incredibly fruitless argument continued for a very long time...

"...Wait! This is no time for this!" I snapped back to reality by the time we were both out of breath.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-gh! Cough! ...Hah... To snap back... so suddenly... you're still... wheeze... naive! Cough!"

...Are you some sickly old man?

"Anyway, we have to find Milly! ...Wait, what were we talking about?"

"About your chest..."

"I'll kill you."

"Oh, Lina, getting all worked up. Look, look, you were shouting to call Milly..."

"Oh, right. We were talking about what happens if the pursuers notice us first. That's easy. We just beat them up."

"I see. Your plan of beating them down, shaking them for money, and then double-dipping with the reward."

...When you put it that way, it sounds incredibly villainous.

"Hmph... well then, let's..."

"That won't be necessary..." I said, looking into the dense trees.

"...I knew it! Lina-san! Naga-san!"

Emerging from the trees was, of course, Milly.

"Looks like you're safe. ...But you found us easily."

At my words, she gave a pleasant smile. "Well, if you're shouting and arguing that loudly for that long, even an idiot would notice."

...Leave me alone.

"Anyway, now that I've found you two, let’s not dawdle. Let's get out of here before the pursuers show up."

"...I'm afraid that's impossible, Milly-san." I whipped my cloak around. "We're already surrounded."

"Finally found you." It was one of the masked figures. "Someone was arguing with an idiot's voice for so long, it made you very easy to find."

...Shut up.

The man glanced at Naga and me. "...You two are an eyesore... I assume that girl hired you... but stay out of this."

"—And what do you plan to do with her after?"

"It's obvious!" Milly cried out in a terrified voice. "They'll capture me and use my power for something evil! It's true that with my power, almost nothing is impossible! As long as there are beasts in this world, I have power equal to a god! To think lowly commoners would try to exploit my power! Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

"Wh-What!?" The pursuers were genuinely enraged by her words.

"...Well, her theories aside, seriously, what do you plan to do with her!?"

"It's decid—urk!"

"Y-O-U shut up!" Naga throttled Milly from behind just as she was about to speak again.

Nice follow, Naga!

"No matter what, we just have to get rid of that girl!"

"G-Get rid of her!?"

"Hey, Lina! This is different from what we heard!"

"Get rid of her... what do you mean!? Why her...?"

"I told you! Because she is a Beastmaster!" The man pointed directly at the now-limp Milly.

.....

"Hey, Naga! Why are you still strangling her with all your might!? ...So? Why target her life just because she's a Beastmaster?"

"Hmph! You're slow! Her very existence is fundamentally incompatible with our ideology and beliefs!"

I-Ideology? Beliefs? You're using such big words all of a sudden...

While I was momentarily bewildered by words I don't hear often, the man seemed to lose his patience. "...You still don't understand after all that... fine... then I shall tell you! We are—we who boast a massive organizational power not just in the coastal countries, but everywhere! We are members of the Animal Protection Association!"

Silence.

Naga and I both facepalmed.

"...Ah... ah..."

".....Aaaaah..."

While Naga and I struggled to recover, the masked man continued his long speech.

"Do you have any idea how many animals are sacrificed every time a Beastmaster's ability is activated!? Since ancient times, that ability has always caught the eye of the military and has been used as a tool for war! I don't care who gets assassinated, what country falls, or how many tens of thousands of humans die, but there are always an incomparable number of animal sacrifices involved! Forced to follow human selfishness and folly, countless animals lose their lives! Should such an absurdity be allowed!? No! The answer is no!"

...Old man...

Every now and then... actually, quite often, you meet people like this. People who are so driven by their ideology and beliefs that they can't see anything else. Since those thoughts and beliefs usually contain a grain of truth, convincing these types is harder than reforming Naga.

"...So... you're going to kill her before she starts doing that?" I said, finally recovering.

"No way! I would never do something like that!" Milly shouted, having revived at some point. "If we talk calmly, I'm sure we can understand each other! We're all human, aren't we?"

...This girl... after spending all that time rubbing them the wrong way, now she says this...

"I've never once thought about using this power for anything bad! And above all, I love animals from the bottom of my heart! Please! Believe in my conscience!"

"Ho-hooo... so I suppose it was because you felt sorry for the animals that you stole all the cows from the farm in Crane Town and sold them off in the next town over?"

"...Urk! You knew about that!"

Hey, hey, hey, hey! "Y-You did something like that!?"

"It... it was just a mistake of my youth! And what about you, Lina-san!? I hear you're always extorting money and goods from bandits!"

"I only punish bad people, so it's fine! Besides, bandits aren't animals!"

For some reason, the members of the Protection Association nodded deeply at my questionable logic.

"Hmph! Anyway, now that the truth has been exposed... what should we do, Lina?" Naga asked.

I crossed my arms. "Hmm... in this case, both sides are pretty much at fault... pretending to be a bystander would mean working for free... Why don't we compromise? We'll pile up the entire fortunes of both Milly and the Association right here, and we'll side with whoever has more."

"NO WAY!" Milly and the Association members shouted in unison.

...I thought it was a good idea.

"Darn it! Everyone is an enemy now! Come at me!"

Oh no! Milly snapped!

"Hmph! I'll take care of holding her back!" Naga stepped forward as usual. "Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! Don't get too intoxicated by your own power! The ability to control animals isn't your exclusive patent!"

"Wh-What!?" Milly's face turned pale.

"I can't do it as well as you, but I can control a few types of animals too! And with the amplification of a spell, they will follow my orders absolutely, no matter how far away they are! —Want to try and see if I'm lying?"

"—Fine! Come to me, insects!" As soon as Milly shouted—

Rustle.

The entire forest stirred. The Association members frantically ran away, perhaps not wanting to fight insects. ...Actually, they might just have no spine.

"Hmph! ...Then I have no choice!" Naga began chanting a spell.

But Milly was the original, and her reaction was faster. Already, countless insects, large and small, were gathering around Milly like a black mist.

"Zelas Goat!" Naga released her mysterious spell!

At that moment— "Go!" Milly gave the command to the insects!

Swish!

A flood of insects surged toward Naga like a thick current!

Patter-patter. The sound was like heavy rain hitting a thin ceiling.

"Lina!?" Naga shouted in surprise. Just before she was swallowed by the swarm, I stood in front of her and spread my cloak to shield her from the bugs.

"...So, you actually have a trick for controlling animals..." I said.

"Hmph... I was planning on surprising you one day..."

"So, when is it coming? This 'rescue'? Don't tell me it was just a bluff."

"Hmph. Don't worry. ...It might take a little longer since they're quite a distance away... but they're coming. Definitely."

"I'm counting on you... so, what is it? The animal you can control?"

"Jellyfish."

"HOW ARE THEY SUPPOSED TO GET ALL THE WAY HERE!?"

I kicked Naga right into the middle of the swarm.

"Hyaaaaaaaaah." Her scream was immediately swallowed by the buzzing of wings.

...Seriously... I was an idiot for believing her, even for a second. In that case, I have to do something myself! ...But even if I wanted to fire a spell at Milly, the moment I turned her way, I'd choke on a face full of bugs.

—Wait! There's that! I quickly chanted a spell.

"Explosion Array!"

It's a spell that travels along the ground. The moment it hits something, it causes the earth there to explode upwards. This should reach Milly without being blocked by the flying insects. Its lethality is low, so it shouldn't kill her.

—However. While an explosion went off where I kicked Naga, there was no reaction otherwise.

"...Naive... a simple... Levitation..." Milly's voice came from behind, mixed with the buzzing. Apparently, she had read my move and escaped into the air with Levitation.

She's actually quite good. ...Wait, this is no time to be impressed. Darn it... she's probably looking at my back, covered in bugs, and feeling superior... ...Wait, if that's the case...

I chanted the next spell. I thrust my right hand behind me blindly. A normal attack spell would be blocked by the bugs, but this...

"Magic Wind!"

Whoosh!

The gust I created swept up all the bugs around me. It's a spell that just creates a strong wind and has no killing power itself, but it's easy to blow the flying insects back toward Milly.

"Hya—" The scream was cut short.

And so—when the insects cleared, what remained was Milly, her face covered in bugs and gasping for air.

"Hmph... that was a case with a bad aftertaste..." Under the clear blue sky, as we walked down the endless highway, Naga murmured quietly.

"...Yeah..." I replied, looking at the drifting clouds.

In the end, I turned the unconscious Milly over to the authorities for cattle rustling and collected a small reward. In our line of work, we call that "selling someone out." But well, this way, the members of the Animal Protection Association can't easily target her life anymore, so it all worked out for everyone.

...I think...

"...There really aren't many good people like me in this world..." I sighed deeply, looking up at the sky.

(The Beast Tamer's Melancholy: End)

Treasure Retrieval Operation

I was staring wide-eyed despite myself.

Rem cream-sauced black shrimp with roe, Claurentz-style teriyaki turkey, et cetera, et cetera!

The needlessly huge table was packed to the edges with a dazzling array of magnificent dishes!

...Ah... what a wonderful aroma.

"Actually... the reason I have a request for you is none other than this: I would like you to retrieve a certain item from a certain individual."

The elderly man with romantic gray hair sitting across the table spoke in a quiet tone. He had likely long passed sixty, but he was a slender, smiling person who didn't give off much of an impression of being "old."

"Huh."

I answered half-distractedly, my gaze still poured over the lined-up food.

The one who had called me out upon my arrival in this town was Mr. Croule, the Vice-Councilor of the Mages' Guild—to put it simply, the old man in front of me. I had visited his home, and the moment I sat at the table, dishes were laid out before me without a word...

However, the words "Please, eat" still hadn't been heard.

...Ah... the precious food is going to get cold...

"Some time ago, I discovered various artifacts and such from ruins in a nearby mountain, but they were recently stolen. ...Actually, I have an idea of who the culprit is, but I have no evidence. Besides, as for me, I do not wish to make a large scene of it. That is because—the man believed to be the culprit is also, like myself, a Vice-Councilor of the Mages' Guild."

"...I thee..."

I gulped down my saliva with a loud slurp.

"That is the gist of the incident... if you will accept the job, I will give you more detailed information after the meal..."

"Of course I'll take it!"

To me, answering without a moment's hesitation, Old Croule smiled brightly.

"Oh. That is a relief. Well then—it isn't much, but please, help yourself."

"Let's eat!"

And so. For the sake of justice, honor, and a bit of an appetite, I took on this job.

"I see. I've got the general gist of things."

I said while sipping my post-meal hot milk. During the meal, Old Croule had given me the "detailed story," but to be blunt, it wasn't much different from the rough sketch I had heard before eating.

As a side note, I'll explain that generally across the country, anything excavated becomes the property of the excavator. "Excavated goods" sounds nice, but simply put, it's "treasure." Even if they aren't made of expensive materials, their value as artistic or research objects is quite high. Enthusiasts who want such things regardless of their origin exist anytime, anywhere. I heard that once, in Elmekia or somewhere, they made a law saying "all excavated items must be turned over to the state" for the sake of cultural preservation, only for a wave of illegal

excavations to hit, forcing them to hastily abolish the law. Humans are, after all, creatures of greed above all else.

Old Croule had also discovered a considerable number of crafts from an excavation site with the help of several assistants, but... he shouldn't have done it, but he went and showed them off to someone else. Specifically, to the other Vice-Councilor, Vaisene.

"...But, isn't that a bit thin as a basis to conclude that Vice-Councilor Vaisene is the culprit? I think there's a possibility that rumors leaked from the assistants who helped with the dig, and someone else who heard it did it..."

"No, there is no mistake about Vice-Councilor Vaisene. He is that kind of person. He would do it. I believe so."

...He was a person with a strange way of trusting someone.

"...Then why on earth did you show the excavated items to a person like that?"

"Naturally, because I wanted to brag and make him envious."

Mr. Croule answered in a flat tone without changing his expression.

...Well, people like that certainly are common... the type who incessantly wants to show off their possessions... However, regardless of his polite language, this man's personality seemed to be quite something.

"...B-By the way, I think it's rude, but I'll confirm just in case. Do you have anything like evidence that those stolen excavated items were originally yours?"

"Ho, so you are saying I am lying..."

"No, no, no! It's not like that!"

Detecting something strangely dangerous within that quiet tone, I waved my hands frantically.

...He was quite the creepy type. This old man would definitely cause a conspiracy scandal someday.

"Actually, in a case I handled before, I was told 'retrieve the stolen items,' but when I looked into it, it was nothing of the sort. The one who made the request was actually trying to trick me into stealing from the other party..."

"—I see. So that was it. However, even if you say evidence, they were originally excavated—ah. No. If I recall, among the artifacts was a silverwork talisman. I removed the gemstone to clean off the grime, and it was stolen just like that, but the gemstone itself is here in my hand. If there is a talisman that fits it perfectly, that would be proof it was originally mine."

I see. If that was the case, I could trust him for now. I nodded firmly.

"Understood. Then, can you tell me the situation when they were stolen?"

"Yes. Well then, let us have a detailed talk including my assistant."

"I'm soooooorry! It's aaaaall my faaaaaaault!"

The one who started apologizing the moment she heard we wanted an explanation was none other than Mr. Croule's assistant. She looked to be around twenty. She was a beauty with a short haircut, but...

"—There, there. Caroline-kun."

Without responding to Mr. Croule's call, she just kept on screaming.

"Aaaaaaaaah! I'm sure I'll be fired for this! Fiiiiiiiired! Thrown out of the Mages' Guild, abandoned by my parents as a failure of a daughter! After wandering the streets, I'll die all alone and lonely! Yes, I'll diiiiiiiiie! Noooooo! I don't want to diiiiiiie!"

...Lady, lady...

"...What is... this...?"

I asked in a stunned tone.

"No, no, she is quite a capable assistant, but... she's a little bit clumsy and has a tendency to be a worrywart. Now, there, there, Caroline-kun."

"Iya-o-e-e-e-e!"

"Caroline-kun."

"Nobero-he-e-e-e!"

Gomesu!

Without changing his expression, the kick Mr. Croule suddenly unleashed without warning buried itself right into her temple!

"Ugh!"

"...My, you seem to have finally settled down."

Mr. Croule spoke to her as she writhed in pain, still wearing that same gentle smile.

...He was a pretty scary old man...

"By the way, Caroline-kun, I won't do anything like eliminate you, so could you give us a bit of your story?"

"...A-Are you just saying that to give me hope and then eliminate me later?"

Having apparently recovered, she asked while shaking her head.

"I won't, I won't. In fact, even until now, haven't I forgiven you with just a round of punching and kicking until you stopped moving when you dropped the golden statue and bent it, or when you crushed the platinum crown?"

...I'm telling you, that's already way too much...

Anyway, according to what she fearfully told us bit by bit—on that day, she had been handed the talisman with the gem removed and various other items from Old Croule, and she finished cleaning them in the work shed in the backyard in the

evening. After finishing dinner outside, she remembered she had forgotten to lock the shed, and when she returned—the excavated items had been stolen in bulk.

—At this point, Mr. Croule's right hook exploded into Carol again without any precursor, but that's a side story.

"Hmm... was there anything else that might be a clue, or anything you noticed?"

"...Nothing... but... Lina-san! Please let me help with this job too!"

Carol made the request with a desperate look in her eyes, her fists clenched tight against her chest.

"However, Caroline-kun, this is..."

"I know it's dangerous. But, we won't know which ones are the stolen goods unless someone who knows the real things is with you, and above all, the reason was my poor management! If we do nothing and the artifacts are never recovered! I! How on earth am I supposed to take responsibility!?"

...She probably just didn't want to be beaten to death by Mr. Croule... most likely, that was the real reason.

"—Hmm, Caroline-kun, I understand your feelings well. —What do you think, Lina-san? Could you let her help with this job?"

"Y-Yes, of course! That would be a big help, wouldn't it! Hahaha!"

I answered with a twitching smile.

Of course, to be blunt, she was nothing but a hindrance, but considering her feelings and Mr. Croule's personality, I couldn't flatly refuse.

And so. The makeshift treasure-recovery duo of me and Carol was formed right then and there.

"This is it. This is Vice-Councilor Vaisene's house."

Carol said in a hushed voice. It was a Western-style mansion perched on a cliff away from town, with ivy crawling all over the walls, standing against the backdrop of a full moon. Naturally, bats were flying around. This was indeed the home of the aforementioned Vice-Councilor Vaisene.

"...But... isn't this blatantly suspicious...?"

"Supposedly, it was designed based on the belief that a researcher's residence must be like this..."

"Don't people just call that 'suspicious hobbies'?"

"I don't think anyone has said it to his face."

...I see.

It was already past midnight. The lights in the mansion's windows were already out.

"—Alright, let's go, Carol. I shouldn't have to say this, but kill your presence as much as possible and try not to make any loud noises."

"Yes. I understand. If we should be found, we'll be treated as thieves without question, eventually sent to prison, completely abandoned by society, and live out a lonely life... and that would be the better outcome; the moment we're discovered, we might be executed on the spot! Noooooooo! I don't want to diiiiiiiie!"

...She was quite a noisy person.

"Explosion Array!"

Bogobeeeee-n!

"...If you don't stay a bit quieter, I'm going to get mad eventually."

I said to her as she trembled from the direct hit of my spell.

"...G-Get mad... you were clearly mad just now!"

Carol raised her voice in protest for some reason.

"I wasn't mad. I just blasted you with an attack spell to shut you up."

"T-Then, Lina-san... you use attack spells on people before you even get mad!?"

"Doing it this way keeps the stress from building up, you see."

At my words, she finally shut her mouth. It seemed she had been convinced.

"Anyway, first we look for a place where we can sneak in!"

"A place where we can sneak in... normal houses don't have those."

"Agh! Stop complaining! Even if there isn't one, we have to do it, don't we!?"

"...Well, that's true, but..."

"Then don't complain. Come on. Let's go."

I said and headed toward the mansion. First, I used *Levitation* magic to carry Carol over the wall, and after confirming there were no guard dogs or sentries in the garden, I landed in the shadow of some bushes. Even looking at it up close, there was no sign of anything in the house.

"...By the way, Carol, does Vice-Councilor Vaisene live alone?"

"I hear he has no family. He has a housekeeper and assistants, but they don't live here."

She answered my question.

...Hmm...

"If that's the case, then only Vice-Councilor Vaisene is here right now. ...In any case, I think there's some kind of security system... By the way, do you know where the Vice-Councilor's room is?"

I asked. If the culprit really was Vice-Councilor Vaisene, he wouldn't put the stolen goods where the housekeeper or assistants could see them, so the most suspicious place would be his own room.

"Well... I've been here a few times on errands for Mr. Croule, but I was only shown into the guest room..."

In the end, I guess we just had to search the hard way...

I killed my footsteps and approached the house. If there were a skylight or a large chimney, I could use *Levitation* to enter through there, but there didn't seem to be anything of the sort. Approaching one of the windows, I scouted for any signs inside.

—For now, there seemed to be no sign of anyone...

"—Lina-san, Lina-san."

"Be quiet."

"...But this window is open."

"It's a trap."

I answered without even turning toward her.

"But it's fine to go in."

...Oh. It really was. ...But... would a normal person enter without hesitation? Anyway, it was too late once we were in. I followed and climbed through the window.

A single hallway stretched deep into the darkness. It was right in the shadow of the mansion, and not even the moonlight reached inside. I couldn't use a "Light" spell, so I relied only on the faint starlight.

"—I think the entrance is this way... so probably over there."

Following Carol's direction, I killed my footsteps and followed after her. Eventually, we arrived in front of a single door.

"It's here."

With a suddenly definitive tone, she opened the door without hesitation and marched inside. I had no choice but to go through the door as well—and in that instant:

"Light!"

A man's voice rang out, and magical light illuminated the room brightly.

"Wh-!?"

"—Welcome, fellow thieves."

In that room, which looked like a lobby, waiting for us was a single elderly man in mage robes, and—nearly ten fully armed town guards.

"Please help me!"

Carol cried out and ran to the mage. "I said I didn't want to! I was threatened by this person and Mr. Croule and forced to do this!"

"Hey! Wait, wait, wait!"

I instinctively raised my voice at her sudden statement.

"Hrngh! Vaisene-dono, it is exactly as you said!"

The guard captain was convinced on his own without me understanding anything at all. One thing I did understand was that the old mage in front of me was Vaisene, the master of this mansion. He was a balding little man who would have looked better in the role of a corrupt merchant than a mage.

"Doing the work of a robber despite being a woman—I'm not impressed. Come on, stay still!"

As he spoke, the guards surrounded me, pointing their swords from all sides. I could have used a move to wipe them out with an attack spell and escape, but if I did that, I'd undoubtedly become a wanted person.

"What is the meaning of this!? Carol!"

Ignoring my glaring gaze, she let out a loud laugh.

"Ahahahaha! You fell for it completely, Lina-san! First, I stole Croule's excavated items and delivered them to Mr. Vaisene!"

"Hey! Carol!"

Vaisene spoke up from the side.

"Don't worry, Mr. Vaisene. Even if this person knows the truth and tells someone, it's just the babbling of a criminal... Lina-san, when you showed up here to take back the stolen goods as requested by Croule, we ambushed and apprehended you with the town guards! I'll go along and testify that I was threatened by Croule. Heheh, with this, Croule becomes a fine thief. And that means Mr. Vaisene will be the next Councilor of the Mages' Guild!"

"I-I see! ...In that case, those guards are also..."

"Heheh. Of course. Mr. Vaisene has already won them over! Right, Mr. Vaisene?"

To Carol, who was seeking agreement, the old man slowly shook his head.

"...?"

She froze instinctively.

"...That is quite an interesting story, young lady. Could you tell us a bit more in detail?"

While wearing a sarcastic smile, the captain took a step toward her. The tips of the guards' swords were already pointing not at me, but at Vaisene and Carol.

"Aaaaaaaaaah! Oh nooooooo! It's all over! I'll definitely be executed! It's the death penalty!"

The moment the guards' gazes concentrated on Carol, who had suddenly started panicking and making a scene:

"Levitation!"

Vaisene suddenly cast a high-speed flight spell!

"What!?"

"Damn it! Don't let him get away!"

The guards started making a fuss, but it was already too late.

Gashan!

Vaisene crashed through the skylight and vanished into the night sky. I could use the same spell, but if I started chanting now, pursuit would be impossible.

And so. The Vice-Councilor had successfully vanished from before our eyes.

"...What did you come here for...?"

Inside the cell of the guardhouse, Carol greeted me with a thoroughly unpleasant face.

"Nfuffuffu. Doing well?"

"Doing well!? With this, I've been eliminated from society! Aaaah! I'll definitely be executed! It's the death penaaaaalty!"

...She was a noisy person as ever.

"But why did you betray Mr. Croule and side with someone like Vaisene? Was it the standard pattern of being bought off with money?"

"...That was part of it... but you'd know why I betrayed him if you just looked at Croule, wouldn't you!?"

...I see... Certainly, I wouldn't want to work under someone like that even by mistake.

"Well, anyway, as it stands, you'll eventually be sent to prison. You'll be bullied by the other prisoners and persecuted by the guards, and when you finally get out, no one will hire you..."

"Noooooo! I don't want to diiiiiie!"

As she clutched her head again, I immediately added my words.

"However—you know. Depending on you, I might be able to help you out."

"—What do you mean?"

She snapped her head up.

"Vaisene still hasn't been found, and the items you stole from Mr. Croule's place weren't found in that house either? —You have an idea where they are, don't you?"

"—That's—"

She looked away, hesitant to speak. It seemed I had hit the bullseye.

"Listen, Carol. Listen well. It's true you were helping Vaisene's plan, but you had a reasonable motive for betraying Mr. Croule, and it's not like you're entirely to blame."

"...Eh...?"

To her, wearing a surprised expression, I whispered secretly in her ear.

"...If you cooperate with me, retrieve the stolen goods, and we manage to capture Vaisene, at the very least your sentence will be lighter. —Depending on how we present it, you might get away with just a strict warning and no actual prison time. —If you cooperate, I'll talk to Mr. Croule and the guard captain to make things work out like that."

"Really!?"

"Of course. —So? Will you help?"

At my words, she thought for a while before saying:

"There's a secret research lab of Mr. Vaisene's in the nearby mountains. —I'll lead the way."

"...Heh. In a place like this..."

I whispered in a small voice, hiding in the shade of the bushes. In a certain mountain near town—it was hilarious because the entrance to the secret laboratory was said to be behind a waterfall that came cascading down. Thinking about it along with his house design, Vice-Councilor Vaisene really had some committed hobbies.

"...But Lina-san, there's no way they can see us from the lab, so why do we have to sneak around like this?"

"It's obvious. It's for the 'mood'."

For some reason, Carol made a disgusted face at my answer.

"...Can't we just charge in already...?"

"—Before that. Is there something like an escape route in that lab?"

"I don't know. I've only been here once."

"...You aren't lying to me at this stage, are you?"

"I have no intention of throwing my life away for Mr. Vaisene."

I see. It seemed she was telling the truth this time.

"Anyway, now that we know that, let's charge in immediately!"

"...What exactly is 'immediately'..."

Naturally, I completely ignored her retort and carried out the infiltration operation.

The inside of the cave was dim and incredibly damp. There was enough glowing moss growing for the surroundings to be faintly visible, and the path was just a single straight road. There was no trouble walking. I wonder how far we went—the light from the entrance had long since vanished.

"Welcome, everyone."

The voice suddenly echoed throughout the cave. Since it wasn't muffled, he was likely using magic to deliver his voice this far. The phrasing was the same as back at the mansion; it's useless to say such things to a person who can't distinguish between a lack of talent and stylistic beauty.

"That voice—Vaisene, isn't it! ...You sure knew we were coming."

After a slight time lag, the voice answered my words.

"...Because I have placed eyes of surveillance here and there. Besides, I figured eventually that Carol there would betray me."

"How cruel! So you didn't trust me after all!?"

Carol raised a voice of protest.

...This girl... having betrayed him so completely, what is she even saying...

"Hmph. Anyway, I feel bad for you, but please die quietly right there."

As soon as the voice finished saying that—

Zugun!

A tremendous sound shook the air of the cave.

"—Good grief... he used quite a cliché trick."

Dobo-debo-go-dego-dego

"O-hi-i-i-i-i-i!"

"But the problem is which spell to use. If I use one that's too flashy, this place will collapse too..."

Debo-dobo-dobo-do-debo-do

"Noheeeeeee!"

"Hey, Carol! Be quiet! I can't gather my thoughts at all!"

"How can you be so calm!? The water is already up to my shins! Aaaah! I'm gonna die! I'm gonna diiiiiiiie!"

Yes. The moment the cave collapsed in front and behind us and the passage was blocked, a massive amount of water started flowing down from above. ...Well, if I used magic, there were plenty of ways to escape, but I guess I'd use the most orthodox trick... I pressed my right hand against the earth and sand blocking our way.

"Earth Dragon!"

Simply put, it was a tunnel-digging spell. A hole large enough for a person to pass through opened in the sand, leading further into the cave—

...Huh...?

"What's wrong, Lina-san?"

I silently pointed into the depths of the hole I had opened with the spell to the approaching Carol. Something silver, like a door with an emblem carved into it, could be seen in the depths.

"...Wh-What is that!?"

"Heheh, that is indeed a magic-sealing door."

Vaisene's voice drifted in from nowhere again.

"A magic-sealing door!?"

I asked, repeating his words.

"Exactly. It is a piece crafted with materials and techniques brought back from a hidden elf village by my now-deceased father. It is impossible to leave even a scratch with the likes of an Earth Dragon or a Vibration Bullet! —Of course, it is possible to break it with a powerful attack spell, but if you use something like that there, you will be buried alive. —Now, what will you do?"

To Vaisene's words filled with mockery, I replied with mockery of my own.

"Hmph—I'll do this. Earth Dragon!"

I cast the digging spell again, this time toward the side wall. If the door was in the way, I just had to bypass it and keep digging where there was no door. But—

"What!?"

I instinctively raised my voice. Just now, in the depths of the hole I had dug with magic, it appeared again. A silver wall.

"—Oh yes, I forgot to mention. In that section, the same material is embedded in the ceiling, floor, and deep within the walls as well. Well, don't waste your efforts. Fuhahahahaha!"

Surrounded on all sides by magic-sealing walls, I stood there stunned. The water was already up to my knees. Was it all over!? No, but there was no harm in trying; first, I'd try a Vibration Bullet or something, and if that didn't work, I'd try a double-cast of ice and fire spells to test for thermal expansion from the temperature difference...

"Lina-san, Lina-san."

"...Hey Carol, I told you to be quiet. I'm thinking desperately right now about how to break this wall..."

"But... if you push this wall a little, it dents."

...Oh...

For a moment, only the sound of water flowing echoed in the cave.

"Damn it! They noticed!"

The one who screamed was Vaisene. It seemed that regardless of its magic resistance, it was physically incredibly weak. I see. So that's why he didn't surround the area directly with that metal, but went to the trouble of embedding it in the rock. Anyway, once I knew that, things were simple. I immediately picked up a nearby stone and set about smashing the door that blocked our path.

"Curse you! To think you have come this far! However, this is the end! Know that this laboratory shall be your grave!"

Eventually, we reached the deepest part of the cave. In a room that could be called massive, equally massive shelves were lined up everywhere. Research equipment, suspicious tools, and books were piled high on the shelves.

"Now! Come! I shall strike you down!"

The one talking big since a moment ago was, of course, Vice-Councilor Vaisene.

"...So? What are you doing?"

At Vaisene, who faltered for a second at my cold question, I said while staring at the old mage in the back of the room with a flat gaze:

"...It looks to me like you were trying to pack your things to run away, only to get buried under the collapsed materials..."

"Hmph! Well spotted for an enemy!"

Still barely poking only his head out from a pile of books and unrecognizable equipment, the old mage put on a grand front.

"If you wish to defeat me, first come here and dig me out! Then, I shall face you in a fair and square duel!"

Why couldn't he just honestly say "Help me"? Anyway, I ignored his nonsense...

"Hah."

I casually gave one of the nearby shelves a light kick.

Dashan!

"Negewa-a-a-a-a..."

The old mage's scream was drowned out in the thunderous sound of equipment and everything else collapsing in a wave.

"Wow. Once it's over, it was quite anticlimactic, wasn't it?"

This was in front of the guards' station. It was after we had thrown the still-unconscious Old Man Vaisene into a cell. Having said that, Carol sought a handshake from me with a bright expression.

"With this, my sentence should be much lighter. This is all thanks to you. Thank you, Lina-san."

"—Ah, about that."

I also wore a pleasant smile, gripped her hand firmly, and patted Carol on the shoulder with my other hand.

"That talk, as I thought, it was no good."

"...Eh...?"

As her face contorted in a twitch, two guards grabbed Carol from behind in a firm hold.

"Well. Mr. Croule has that kind of personality, and when I looked into it, the laws of this country don't allow for a reduction of sentence for that kind of thing."

"...Um... but..."

"—Oh. But don't worry. It seems you'll get as much as five silver coins as a reward for cooperating in Vaisene's arrest. That's great, isn't it! Carol! Luck is on your side! Well then, that's how it is. Do your best with your sentence."

Leaving her with those one-sided words, I turned my back.

—And so. Evil was generally destroyed.

"Liaaaaaaaaaaaaar!"

Leaving Carol's voice behind as she lamented, I left the guards' station.

And they lived happily ever after.

(Treasure Retrieval Operation: End)

Kid's Quest

"Hey! Stay still, won't you!"

"No! Let me go! I said let me go!"

Naga and I happened upon that commotion just as we arrived at the village of Belel. I casually cast my gaze toward the source of the noise—and found myself freezing instinctively.

Four men who looked like mercenaries were grabbing a young girl by the scruff of her neck. Based on her appearance, she was still only five or six years old. She had blonde hair and skin so fair it was almost translucent. Her pink clothes and the red hat pulled low over her eyes were strikingly vivid. She was an incredibly cute girl, the kind you'd instinctively want to nuzzle, but...

"...We hit the jackpot right away, didn't we..." Naga muttered beside me.

"Anyway! It saves us time that things are moving so fast!"

As I spoke, I was already running.

"Um, excuse me, travelers."

Turning toward the voice that was stretched out with a massive drawl, Naga and I were left speechless despite ourselves. Standing there quietly was a woman who was, without hyperbole, a true beauty. She looked to be in her late twenties. She had straight blonde hair that reached down to her waist. Her build was somewhat delicate, but she had curves in all the right places—enviably so. It was a pity that

the turban covering most of her head and her loose-fitting clothes didn't suit her very well.

.....

A brief—no, a rather long silence followed. From her side, she made no move to say anything further.

"...Um... what can we do for you?"

There was no point in just standing there being speechless at each other. I decided to speak up for the time being.

"...Ah... that's right... oh, silly me... my forgetfulness has become particularly bad lately, you see... just the other day, when I went to the nearby forest to gather firewood..."

...Lady, lady...

There are people like this—people who, if you leave them be, will let the conversation wander off into some distant tomorrow forever. Of course, if I tried to keep up with such a conversation properly, the talk would never end.

"Ah, let's save the firewood story for another time. What is your business?"

"Oh, that's right... oh, silly me... my stories always wander off to the side... just the other day, when I was talking to a certain person..."

...Is this woman... doing this on purpose...?

"Hmph. I see. I've read the situation!"

Naga suddenly said this and pointed a finger sharply at her.

"I bet you just want us to be someone for you to chat with!"

"No, no, that isn't it. ...Actually, my daughter has gone missing."

She said this in an incredibly easygoing tone and gave a little wave of her hand.

Wait. That was a pretty big deal.

"...A-Anyway, talking while standing isn't ideal, so let's discuss the details over a meal."

"...That's true. Let's do that."

She gave a firm nod.

"—So, what is your name?"

At a small eatery in a corner of town, once the three of us had finished off Lunch Set A, I asked her.

"...Oh, now that you mention it, I haven't introduced myself yet... I am called Shaileen."

"I'm Lina."

"Hmph. And I am the one who is the strongest and greatest in the life of this Lina Inverse—"

"Naga, the goldfish poop."

"...Could you not be so blunt...?" Naga whispered softly in my ear.

...It seemed that even she was bothered by it.

"...It is a pleasure to meet you... by the way... I wonder if the food isn't ready yet..."

...Is she still going to eat? This woman. She was almost on par with Naga or me.

"—Ma'am! Three more Lunch Set Bs, please."

"Hmph. And some brandy, too. Make it a large mug."

After the two finished placing their additional orders, they turned their attention back to Shaileen.

"...So? About your daughter?"

"...Daughter...?"

She tilted her head slightly, remained silent for a while, and then—

"...How do you know about my daughter...?"

"Hey! You were the one who told us!"

"...Was I...?"

To me, who had instinctively raised my voice, she answered with her usual airheadedness.

...If possible, I wished she wouldn't do such drawn-out "boke" routines. Dealing with her was incredibly exhausting... though, of course, there was the possibility that this was just her natural personality...

"...Um... it happened a little while ago, but actually, my daughter Maureen has vanished..."

"—Can you tell us a bit more about the situation at that time?"

At my question, she tilted her head slightly again and said, "...Well... even if you ask me such difficult things..."

"What exactly is difficult about it?"

"...When I happened to notice, she was gone..."

While saying something utterly irresponsible, she took a piece of paper with a drawing on it from her pocket and unfolded it.

"This is my daughter, Maureen."

"...Whoa..."

I let out a small voice instinctively. She was an incredibly cute girl who looked to be five or six years old. There was likely some beautification involved, but even accounting for that, she was quite something.

...A kidnapping, maybe...?

"...Hmph... if that's the case, we can't just overlook it, Lina."

For once, I agreed with Naga's opinion.

That was just yesterday. Based only on Shaileen's incredibly unreliable clue—"I have a feeling she's somewhere near the town of Kurtoza"—we headed that way for the time being. But to think we'd suddenly stumble upon a scene in the neighboring village where Maureen was being captured...

"Inverse Crash!"

Without a word, the flying kick I unleashed struck the face of the man holding Maureen directly.

"Gebyo!?"

The man collapsed helplessly. Without missing a beat, Naga scooped Maureen up into her arms, swung her cloak open with a flourish, and let out a laugh.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! The custody of this young lady has certainly been taken by me, Naga the White Serpent!"

She spat out lines that sounded completely like a villain.

"What!? What is this!?"

Maureen, seemingly unable to understand the situation at all, struggled and thrashed about in Naga's arms. Just as in the portrait Shaileen had shown us—no, she was even cuter in person.

"You lot! What do you think you're doing!?" one of the men shouted.

There were four opponents. Among them, the one I had just kicked down seemed to be a mage. From the look of things, they all seemed to be quite skilled, but...

"I don't think anything of it!" I barked at the men. "I'm not handing this girl over to you!"

Before I could even finish speaking—

"Raywing!"

The mage unleashed a spell toward Naga! But something like that is easy enough to avoid if you just dodge. However—

Bam!

The Raywing heading for Naga suddenly burst in mid-air, turning into five or six small arrows of light that swarmed her!

"Hiwawawawawa!?"

Naga managed to dodge it while practically rolling on the ground. In the process, Maureen's hat fell off with a plop—and what appeared from beneath the hat were silky hair and long ears.

—An Elf!?

They are a race with a much larger magical capacity and longer lifespan than humans, but due to various past events, their numbers have dwindled significantly. Usually, they live quietly apart from human society. However, even now among humans, there are organizations that kidnap Elves for human trafficking, wanting their beauty or the secrets of their longevity.

"Hey! What exactly do you plan to do with me!?" Maureen shouted from inside Naga's arms.

At that moment, I felt like I understood why Maureen was being targeted.

—I see! So these men—

"They're going to kidnap you and sell you off to some rich person for experiments or as a pet!"

"What did you say!?"

At my words, Maureen turned completely pale.

"What kind of thing are you thinking!? You heretics! You're lower than beasts!"

While screaming something or other, she thrashed about frantically in Naga's arms.

"Tch!"

Whether he was angry because I hit the mark or not, one of the men drew his sword and rushed toward me!

"Freeze Arrow!"

Naga’s spell flew toward him!

"Something like this!"

The man actually dodged all of them, even though there were more than a dozen. But!

"Light!"

The *Light* spell I fired with a slight delay in timing struck the man's face perfectly!

"Guh!!"

"Now! Naga! We're running!"

I started running as I spoke.

"As if we'd let you escape!"

The men chased after us. However, since Naga was carrying Maureen, we couldn't run very fast.

"Agh! Flare Arrow!"

I fired a single spell as I turned around! But!

"Flame Wall!"

The mage’s spell scattered my Flare Arrow to the left and right. Did he read my move!? He was quite good!

However, as long as we had the Maureen they were after, they wouldn't be able to launch magical attacks recklessly. That said, at this rate, it would just be a game of cat and mouse. Argh! If it’s come to this!

I began to chant a spell. I stopped dead in my tracks and turned back toward our pursuers.

"Levitation!"

It was the high-speed flight spell. My body was wrapped in a barrier of wind, and I floated softly into the air. And then, just like that—I charged straight at the pursuers!

Dobame-begogik!

"Gakewa!"

They apparently hadn't expected this at all and tumbled over helplessly. I spent a while flying around wildly above their heads.

"You brat! Scurrying around!"

However, soon enough, one of them stood up with a sword in one hand.

—This is bad!

I hurriedly went into a steep climb. Because the wind barrier surrounding me was constantly creating a flow, it could easily deflect something like a Flare Arrow, but the barrier itself wasn't that strong. It was only at a level where a skilled warrior could easily break it if they aimed properly and slashed with a sword. I canceled the spell and landed on the roof of a nearby house.

"Don't interfere!"

"Flare Arrow!"

I threw an attack spell at the pursuer without a word of nonsense. But the enemy mage easily scattered it with a wind barrier. Next came my Freeze Arrow. Of course, the enemy mage blocked this without effort too. Since we were in the middle of town, I couldn't use any flashy spells. But for now, this was enough. I persistently and repeatedly fired several shots of Freeze Arrows and such.

"...Are you stalling for time!?"

Exactly.

—Well, it's probably about time.

"Levitation!"

I chanted the high-speed flight spell again and followed after Naga, who was already out of sight. Since I had bought that much time, they should have already escaped far enough outside the village.

...Assuming Naga hadn't gotten lost, that is...

And then, at that moment.

Dochugo-o-o-n!

The sound of a flashy explosion definitely came from the direction where Naga and Maureen had fled.

"Naga! Maureen!"

In that spot where smoke was wafting, stood a crisp, charred Naga. The Elven girl was nowhere to be seen.

"Maureen!"

I called out, but there was no answer.

—Could it be!? Had an ally of the pursuers been lying in ambush here!?

"Naga! Get a hold of yourself!"

When I gave her two or three "gentle" kicks, she suddenly stood up with a start! As usual, she was an immortal creature... While sweeping her hair back with a flourish, she said, "...Hmph... for someone like me, Naga the White Serpent, to have made such a blunder."

"Enough with the posing! What on earth happened!?"

"...That is... I was suddenly hit by an attack spell."

She spoke with a lack of clarity that was rare for her. There was no way that Naga, of all people, would be reflecting on her actions...

"Where's Maureen!?"

"That's what Maureen did."

"Agh! That's why I'm asking! What happened to Maureen!?"

"I'm telling you! I was suddenly hit by an attack spell from Maureen!"

"...Huh...?"

For a moment, I couldn't understand Naga's words and lost my line.

"...Um... well..."

"I'm saying that while we were escaping, Maureen suddenly launched an attack spell at me."

"...Um... but... why!?"

"I don't know why." Naga answered with a grumpy face.

—Argh! Could it be!?

"Naga! Did you tell Maureen!? Did you tell her, 'We were asked by your mother to come and bring you back'!?"

"...Why do I have to explain every little thing like that...?"

"Aaaaaaaaaah! I knew it!"

I instinctively clutched my head.

"...What is wrong with you..."

"...M-Maureen probably misunderstood us for kidnappers!"

"!"

Naga raised her voice too. Yes. Earlier, when we were fighting those guys over Maureen, I said this about the pursuers: "They're going to kidnap her and sell her off somewhere." However—I said it without a subject. Maureen probably interpreted this as "Lina and Naga" were going to "kidnap her and sell her off." Otherwise, there's no way she would suddenly blast Naga with a spell.

"...What are we going to do... about that..." Naga asked in a gloomy tone.

"What do you mean, 'what'? Those guys from earlier are undoubtedly still after Maureen. In that case, we have no choice but to go after her."

"Go after her... we don't even know which way she went!"

"Probably... to the village of Laidoc."

"I see."

Naga gave a single nod and swung her cloak open. "Where Shaileen is."

My prediction was correct. Naga and I discovered the figure of a girl walking along the highway by herself just a little before Laidoc. After getting within a certain distance, I called out to her.

"...Maureen, wait!"

Her body gave a small jolt, and she turned toward us as if she had been snapped back to reality.

"You... you kidnappers are here again!"

"...No, we're..."

"Don't come near me! I don't want to be touched by (broadcast-prohibited terms) like you who don't think of people as people! I'll be defiled!"

"...Um, listen..."

"You chestless (publication-prohibited terms) of a (discriminatory term)..."

"Be quiet."

Gegik.

My flying kick caught Maureen's face perfectly. Setting aside other things, I will not forgive "chestless"! If she weren't a child, I'd be blasting her with an attack spell.

"We were! We were looking for you because Shaileen asked us to!"

At my words, Maureen tilted her head slightly.

"...Ow, ow, ow... but earlier, you said out of your own mouth that you were going to kidnap me and sell me off..."

"That was a misunderstanding! I just thought the guys who were trying to catch you might be planning to do that!"

"...S-So what about you guys?"

She asked in an unnervingly mature tone, though a hint of caution remained.

"Like I said, we were asked by Shaileen. She was very worried that you suddenly disappeared. Your mother. ...Wait, Maureen? What's wrong?"

I instinctively asked as she suddenly clutched her head.

"...Ah... ah..." In a voice that sounded exhausted for some reason, she said, "...I think you can tell by looking at me... but I'm an Elf..."

The moment she was about to say something, a man's voice came from behind. "Found you!"

Turning around, just as expected, there were the four men! ...They were persistent. But how did they know where we were? Anyway, escaping comes first!

"Naga! Take Maureen!"

"Okay!"

I began to chant a spell.

"As if we'd let you!" the men shouted and started running.

Naga scooped Maureen up again and started running toward the village of Laidoc. However, the first one to strike was the enemy mage.

"Blue Magic Blast Wave!"

Agh! He must have pre-chanted the spell! I managed to dodge it by jumping to the side. But!

"Flare Arrow!"

The second wave came from one of them in warrior's attire who was closing in on Naga!

"Dowaaaaaah!?"

A magic warrior!? I shouted while barely dodging it, but my spell was interrupted. These guys—they’re stronger than I thought! If it’s come to this, should I wipe them out with a powerful attack spell!? But if I did that, even if I didn't care about Naga, there was a risk of involving Maureen.

In the moment of hesitation, the men were closing in on Naga. —Argh! I won't let that happen! I chased after Naga as well. Naga, unusually for her, noticed the situation. She shot a glance toward me.

"Lina! Pass!"

As she spoke, she suddenly hurled Maureen toward me! Hey!

"Ukyo-o-o-o-o!?"

I still managed to catch the girl as she flew toward me screaming. ...S-She’s heavy!

The men immediately changed direction and headed toward me! Trying to run or fight in this state was a bit too much.

"Naga! Toss!"

I threw her back toward her.

"Attaaaaaaack!"

Bebagok!

"Why are you 'attacking' her!?"

I hurriedly scooped up Maureen, who had been knocked out on the ground by Naga's finishing attack.

"Hmph! It is the momentum of the moment, the flow of the times, so to speak!" Naga said shamelessly.

"You brat! How dare you!"

The men shouted and chased after us, perhaps angry that their "merchandise" was being treated roughly. This is bad! We'll be caught at this rate! Argh! If it’s come to this! I quickly chanted a spell.

"Blast Array!"

Budooooooon!

They apparently hadn't expected this, and Naga and the pursuers were blown away completely. ...Well... Naga isn't the kind of person who'd be finished by something like this, and there's an old maxim that some sacrifices are unavoidable.

"...Ugh... ugh..."

However, the damage seemed small, and some were already trying to pick themselves up. I have to run while I have the chance! While still holding Maureen, I hurried toward Laidoc.

The guys caught up to us again just as I entered the village.

"Wait right there!"

I had hoped that a revived Naga might have held them back—but that expectation was indeed naive. On the contrary, Naga seemed to be quite unhappy about being blown away by me, and she was chasing me along with them. Agh! How narrow-minded!

"Freeze Arrow!"

I threw a warning shot at the five pursuers and headed further into the village.

"...Ugh... nnn..." Maureen let out a small groan in my arms. It seemed she had finally woken up.

"You're awake? We're almost..."

Thud.

The moment I turned my attention to her for an instant, I collided head-on with someone.

"...Ow, ow, ow..."

Even while falling on my rear, the fact that I didn't let go of Maureen was quite impressive, if I do say so myself. It seemed I had collided with someone coming out of an alley or somewhere... Wait...

"...Oh... isn't that Maureen..."

Shaileen spoke in her usual airheaded tone.

—This is bad! If those guys find Shaileen, they'll undoubtedly think, "Let's catch her and sell her off too!" Turning around, the men were already there! Their gazes were already fixed on Shaileen! This was bad!

"Shaileen! Run!"

At that moment—for some reason, my line and the men's line harmonized perfectly.

"...Huh...?"

Once again, our voices harmonized, and the men and I stared at each other instinctively.

"...Um..."

Shaileen spoke to no one in particular with an incredibly drawn-out voice.

"...Pardon me... but who might you all be?"

...Hey...

"Look! It's me!" I said.

"We were asked to find your daughter!" one of the men said.

The first half was, needless to say, my line. And the second half—was the line of one of the men.

...Heh...?

The men and I stared at each other once again.

"...Hmph... I see... so that's how it was..."

The one who muttered that while striking a Naga-like pose was none other than Maureen.

"What is going on!?" I instinctively asked her.

"In other words, Mother asked those men over there, and also you guys, to find me."

"...Eh...? But..."

"—The lifespan of us Elves is five or six times that of humans."

Suddenly, the conversation jumped to a distant place. ...Well... I know that much...

"Actually, despite how I look, I'm already nineteen. Mother is one hundred and fifty this year."

"...Um... I'm not following the story..." one of the men said.

"In other words—" Maureen put a hand on Shaileen's shoulder with a look of extreme gloom. "Early-onset senility."

...Hey...

"...Supposedly, the brain is something that withers if you don't use it... see, we spend our lives quietly in a completely secluded hidden village, right? Nowadays, unlike in the past, it’s not fashionable to spend your whole life researching spells... Lately among us, this senility thing has become quite a social problem."

As she spoke, she nodded to herself.

"Even this time, it seems she asked me to run an errand to a human town, and then completely forgot about it and asked you guys to look for me..."

It "seems" she did...? Kid, you...

"It seems we've caused you all a lot of trouble. I'm sorry. —Now. Shall we go, Mother?"

As she spoke, Maureen helped Shaileen stand up.

"...By the way, Maureen, I wonder if the meal isn't ready yet...?"

"Didn't you just eat?"

While exchanging such conversation, the Elven parent and child went away hand in hand. Left behind—with an unventable anger in their chests—were six people, simply being blown by the wind in silence...

(Kid's Quest: End)

Aftermath of the Upheaval

The battle was over, or so it seemed. The echoes of an explosion reverberated through the trees. Cicadas fell silent, birds took flight, and the surrounding flora was leveled—the typical "summer scenery" whenever I'm around.

It was a perfectly ordinary sight: me, Lina Inverse, and my usual traveling companions right at the center of a roaring uproar.

"Dug Wave!"

Zguwashiiiii!

"Nofihhhhh!"

Two thugs who failed to dodge my spell were sent flying. That left about ten of them. Despite being visibly shaken, they hadn't lost their fighting spirit yet. They were a gutsy bunch—the type that usually doesn't live very long.

We were just minding our own business, walking along the forest road, when they ambushed us without a word. Their skill level wasn't particularly impressive, but the problem was we were hauling around some dead weight.

"Waaaah."

I shifted my gaze toward a drawn-out, tensionless scream. Sure enough, there was Rail, desperately trying to parry an enemy's blade with his short sword, getting pushed back step by step.

Argh, what a pain!

But before I could even start chanting a support spell—

"Raywing!"

Bam!

Naga fired a spell from the side, and "Thug A" collapsed into a heap on the spot.

"…Phew. Thank you very much."

"Hmph! If you have time to give thanks, use it to chant a spell!" Naga replied, flourishing her mantle with a dramatic *swish*.

"…Tch! Retreated!" The leader barked. Apparently, they finally realized they were outmatched. At his command, the remaining men scooped up their fallen comrades and vanished into the forest as quickly as they had appeared.

Naturally, I didn't give chase. It could have been a trap to lure us in.

First, I checked on everyone. Naga and I were fine, obviously. Rail was okay too. And...

"Where’s Mr. Burglar!?"

At my question, Naga and Rail blinked and looked around.

"Ho. Come to think of it, he’s nowhere to be seen."

"…I’m certain he was here at the start..."

The two of them stated the obvious. Don't tell me those guys actually managed to—

"Good grief, that was a nasty experience."

The voice came from the bushes on the opposite side of where the men had fled. Emerging from the foliage was a man in an ordinary wizard’s style—black mantle, black hood, middle-aged.

"Hey, Mr. Burglar," Rail called out. "Are you safe? That’s a relief."

"Yes, well... I tried to run away in a panic, but I hit my head on a tree. I’ve been unconscious until just now." He spoke without a hint of shame. "…However, seeing as those kinds of men are appearing... it seems Grimms's hideout isn't far from here."

"I agree," I said, nodding at Burglar’s murmur.

Once, there was an insurrection.

At the Sorcerers' Guild in Creasall City, the Vice-Chairmen and other mages rose up against Chairman Hummingham, who had committed every atrocity imaginable. Naga and I got caught up in the mess, sided with the rebels, and ultimately brought the evil Chairman Hummingham to justice.

However, while we were busy with the aftermath—reports and whatnot—a new problem cropped up: Hummingham’s remnants.

Free Lord Hummingham.

It started one morning with those words painted in giant letters on the wall of the Sorcerers' Guild. From that day on, a relentless campaign of harassment against the Creasall Guild began.

Small fires in the archives, ransacked laboratories, chain letters, solicitations from suspicious cults, and even a girl selling dried fish singing at the front door. From bizarre nonsense to actual interference with business, something happened almost every single day.

The current Chairman, who took over for Hummingham, was at his wit's end and finally launched a formal investigation. Eventually, intelligence came in: a man named Grimms, who had formerly sided with Hummingham, was hiding near Petri Village, a short distance from Creasall. He was the one pulling the strings.

Thus, four members were chosen to verify the truth and, if it were real, stop him.

First, Naga and I, who happened to still be in town. Then, our guide, Rail—apparently, Petri Village was his hometown. I’d had a bit to do with him during the previous incident; if I had to describe him in a word, he was like a sea lily.

And finally, a new face: Mr. Burglar, our negotiator. He was also a member of the Creasall Sorcerers' Guild and had been active on the anti-Hummingham side. Even

though he and Grimms were on opposite sides now, they had a long history. It was his own request to come along, hoping he could somehow persuade Grimms to change his ways.

"…But... I didn't think Mr. Grimms would send assassins so suddenly... he seems quite desperate..." Rail said in his usual tension-free voice. "…What do you think? At this rate, it might be dangerous to proceed without a plan. For now, let’s discuss what kind of strategy to use, and once we've reached a consensus, we can contact the Guild in Creasall and ask if this strategy is acceptable..."

"…You... you really love 'discussing' things, don't you? As usual..."

"Yes... I love how I can feel like I'm participating just by sitting there with a troubled look on my face."

...Well... I didn't feel like poking my nose into someone's hobby, but...

"Ohohohoho! Naive! How naive! If I were to falter over something like this, it would disgrace the name of Naga the White Serpent! We move straight ahead without a care!"

It sounded like something an incompetent military commander would say, but for once, Naga was right. If we hesitated here, the enemy would either flee or reinforce. Either way, it would only give them breathing room. Barge in suddenly and flatten them without a word. That’s how a battle should be.

...Well, since we had the tedious "persuasion" event this time, I couldn't exactly flatten them right away.

"I agree with Lady Naga’s opinion," Burglar muttered before I could speak up. "Returning to town won't change our policy. In that case, proceeding as we are is the best move."

"I agree," I nodded.

Rail looked genuinely disappointed. "…So... we're not going to discuss it...?"

"We're not," the three of us replied in perfect harmony.

"Alright. We'll head out first thing tomorrow morning, raid the hideout in one go, and settle this."

I took a sip of my after-dinner tea. We had finally reached Petri Village.

...Well, calling it "finally" makes it sound like we struggled, but we really didn't. We were attacked a few more times by what seemed to be Grimms's hired assassins, but Naga and I handled them with ease.

Today, after arriving in Petri and asking around, we heard rumors that a large group of people had recently settled in the mountains a bit away from the village. The villagers left them alone since they didn't seem to be bandits. There was no doubt; Grimms's faction was here.

We set up base in the village's only inn—which had no other guests—and immediately started planning for tomorrow. Rail offered his family's home, but I couldn't exactly discuss a raid in front of his family.

"…A raid plan... is that it...?" Rail muttered dissatisfactorily. I guess he wanted more "discussion."

"That's it," I answered flatly. "Since we don't know how the enemy will act, there's no point in making a detailed strategy."

"…But... if that's the case, we didn't have to stay at an inn... we could have stayed at my house... inns cost money, after all..."

Twitch.

...N-now that he mentioned it...

"D-don't worry about it. The inn fee will be covered by the Sorcerers' Guild as a necessary expense anyway..."

"…Please don't talk like the former Chairman Hummingham..."

"Ugh..." I groaned softly.

"If you all had come to my house... my family would have discussed what to serve for dinner, and then we would have discussed with you whether that was okay..." Rail murmured with an almost ecstatic expression.

"…Is your whole family the same type as you?" At Naga's question, he gave a proud, swaying nod.

"Yes. Of course they are."

Naga and I were speechless. Just imagine it: a whole family of Rails, swaying like seaweed in the ocean, whispering and discussing endlessly! Terrifying! Utterly terrifying!

...Yeah, I'm glad we chose the inn.

"…A-anyway... we leave first thing tomorrow. Got it?" I said, composed.

"Hmph. Such a trivial task. It might not have even been worth the effort for me, Naga the White Serpent, to come all this way," Naga said, tossing her hair.

However...

"…I wonder if it will really go that smoothly...?" It was Burglar who let out that faint whisper.

"What do you mean by that?"

"…Hm? Oh, no..." When I pressed him, he spoke somewhat hurriedly. "I-it's nothing. It's just that I've known him for a long time. …Let me tell you, he's sharp. Very sharp."

He stood up from his seat.

"Where are you going?"

"I'm a bit tired today... I'll be turning in early." He answered without looking back and disappeared up the stairs to the guest rooms.

...Hmm...

"…Geez... Mr. Burglar sure has it rough..." Rail muttered loudly, nodding off. "…After all, he’s known Mr. Grimms for a long time... I’m sure he’s agonizing over many things..."

"——I wonder..." I whispered, watching the spot where Burglar had vanished.

That morning, the world was painted in solid white.

Through a thick morning mist, the four of us made our way toward Burglar's—wait, Grimms's hideout. Our destination was in the mountains. There was a mountain path of sorts, but it was rough and visibility was zero. It wasn't what you'd call an easy walk.

The mist showed no signs of thinning. While great for a surprise attack, we had the "Burglar persuades Grimms" event first. This fog offered us no advantage. In fact, it slowed our pace, and if we ended up fighting, the poor visibility meant we might accidentally hit our allies with our spells.

...Well, even with good visibility, I tend to hit them anyway...

According to Rail, who was leading, it was always like this here.

"…Still... this is a bit... difficult..." Burglar’s voice sounded exhausted.

"…Are you okay...?" Rail stopped and turned around.

I turned too, but Burglar, who was supposed to be behind me, had vanished into the mist.

"Hey, Naga! Why are you in front of me when you were supposed to be at the very back!?"

"Hmph. How naive, Lina Inverse." She flourished her mantle. "I, Naga the White Serpent, have no intention of staying behind anyone forever!"

Gah! This woman!

Just as I was about to snap at her—

Rustle.

The bushes stirred, and the air was suddenly filled with countless presences.

"An ambush!?" I shouted.

Honestly, I hadn't expected them to attack here. I'd considered the possibility, but in this fog, the enemy risked friendly fire just as much as we did—if not more, given their numbers. Anyone could see that.

Attacking despite that meant they were either desperate, or...

While I was thinking, several presences rushed toward us through the white murk. Fine! If that's how it is!

Sorry, guys, but I'm going to have to ask you to be noble sacrifices! I'll just laugh it off and apologize later!

Steeling my heart without hesitation, I began chanting a wide-range indiscriminate attack spell.

However—

"Gwah!? What are you doing! Let go!" The voice from behind was Burglar's.

Shoot!

By the time I realized, it was too late.

"Do you hear me? We have taken your comrade hostage." A man's voice echoed from somewhere deep in the white mist.

"Are you Grimms!?"

At my question, the voice only let out a low, muffled laugh. "We're taking this one. If you value his life, come to the old castle east of Layton Village. Understood?"

As soon as he said that, I could feel the presences around us retreating.

"…Dammit...!" I gnashed my teeth.

If we tried to chase them in these mountains with this visibility, we'd just end up getting lost.

"…They got us... completely..." Standing in the white mist, I muttered to myself. The presence of the group that snatched Burglar was entirely gone.

"…Oh dear... this is a problem..." Rail whispered in his usual, tension-free tone.

It was noon. We were back at the inn in Petri Village, having lunch.

After the incident, we waited for the mist to clear and checked the place where the hideout was supposed to be, but it was already empty. There were signs that a large number of people had been there, but they had clearly cleared out.

So, we returned to the village for a strategy meeting over food.

"By the way, Rail, first thing I want to know: where is Layton Village?"

"…Let's see... I believe it's about two days' journey northeast from here..."

——Which means we're getting even further away from Creasall City...

"But the problem is why they did this," I said, biting into a spicy fried chicken wing.

"…Hmm... I wonder why..." Rail muttered with a troubled face. Of course, there wasn't a hint of tension in his voice.

"Hmph. It's obvious. They were terrified of the power of Naga the White Serpent and took a hostage. But how amusing. Did they think Lina or I would actually care about a hostage? Ohohoho!" Naga said, washing down some herb-steamed lamb with a mug of brandy.

...I *do* care, for the record. Unlike you.

"That's not it. What I want to know isn't why they took Burglar hostage, but why they bothered calling us all the way to Layton Village."

"Hmph. To settle things with us, obviously." Naga spat out a thoughtless line.

"Argh! Not that! If they just wanted to settle things using a hostage as a shield, any place would do! And yet, they chose Layton Village instead of here. I'm asking what that means!"

"Hmph! How should I know something like that!"

"Don't act so proud of it! ...Good grief..."

"…Hmm... I wonder what it means..." Rail muttered with his arms crossed.

"The two most orthodox possibilities are: first, there's some kind of trap in Layton Village. Or, they're stalling for time for some reason. ...Though, if it's a trap, what kind? If it's stalling, what are they planning to do with that time? I don't know that much yet."

"…Exactly..." Rail nodded.

I gave him a deadpan look. "…You... you really are just sitting there with a troubled face..."

"…Yes... I told you that before..." Rail nodded cheerfully. "…But this makes me feel like I'm participating, so it's fine..."

It's not fine.

"…If you don't intend to give an opinion, I'm cutting you out of the discussion..."

"Ah! Not that!" Rail panicked.

"Then give us an opinion."

"…An opinion...?" Prompted, he finally spoke up reluctantly. "…Well... I feel like the possibility of a trap is low. If they were going to set a trap, they could have used their hideout here. ...However... if the goal is stalling for time... for example, maybe they initially intended to fight us, but after actually fighting, they realized we were quite tough... Since they can't afford to waste their strength, they wanted to flee, but if they just ran, we'd chase them...

"So, they took a hostage and told us to 'come to Layton' while they fled in a completely different direction... Since we have a hostage, we have no choice but to go... If that's the case, they probably took Mr. Burglar along just in case... That's my opinion..."

"....."

"....."

Naga and I were stunned for a moment.

"…Y-you... You can actually give a sensible opinion..." Naga said, aghast.

"If you can give a sensible opinion, why do you usually stay quiet?"

At my question, he looked a bit embarrassed. "…If I give an opinion, I'll stand out... and that's embarrassing, isn't it?"

He was a complicated guy.

"——Anyway, Rail's right. We have no choice but to go to Layton."

"Hmph. It's a pain, but I suppose we must."

Naga and I went back to eating. For a while, only the sound of clinking cutlery filled the room—

"…Um..." Rail spoke up hesitantly. "…By any chance... is the discussion over...?"

"We're going to Layton like we were told. What else is there to discuss?"

"…I see... I guess you're right..." Rail let out a deep sigh and muttered with a disappointed face.

...This guy... I bet the real reason he doesn't give his own opinion is that he hates for the discussion to end. You see people like that sometimes—people who just love holding discussions and meetings for the sake of it.

But more importantly, something was bothering me. Why were our movements so transparent to them? It was too efficient for us to just have walked into an

ambush. For starters, how did they even know the four of us were the Grimms subjugation team?

——If my guess was right, things were about to get complicated...

Bathed in moonlight and the stifling scent of greenery, a small, quiet old castle stood deep in the mountains.

It was the second night since Burglar had been kidnapped. We had skipped Layton Village and come straight here. The reason was simple: stopping at the village might have given us some info, but it would have also alerted them to our arrival.

——Assuming they were even here, of course.

As Rail pointed out, there was a good chance the castle was empty and they were already fleeing down some highway with Burglar. The three of us were hiding in the bushes, looking down from the mountain side. I'd done a quick scout earlier, but not a single light was visible. Honestly, I didn't sense any presence.

The odds were that no one was here, but...

"…Now then... what shall we do..."

"That's obvious. A direct frontal assault," I answered Rail.

"But... Mr. Burglar might be a hostage... Let's be cautious and discuss what to do..."

"If we do that, the sun will be up. The hostage will be fine."

"…Are you sure...?"

"I'm sure. A hostage situation only works if the enemy is holding a knife to their throat and saying, 'Move and the hostage dies!' Which means you just have to flatten them before they finish that sentence."

"…Is that how it works...?"

"Yes." I stated firmly. In a fight like this, unless there's a huge gap in skill, the one who strikes first usually wins. It's about breaking the enemy’s will. "Anyway, no use whining. Let’s go!"

I declared unilaterally and began chanting under my breath as I dashed down the slope toward the old castle.

"Hmph! Understood!" Naga followed immediately. Rail had no choice but to follow.

We sped down the slope, zipped past the castle, spun around, and charged the main gate. As we burst through the long-rotted gate—

The instant my foot touched the ground, I felt a strange sensation.

"Raywing!"

I soared into the air. It’s a spell that surrounds the caster in a wind barrier for high-speed flight. I pulled a U-turn mid-air and slammed into Naga, who was running right behind me!

Spapooooon!

Bounced back by the wind barrier, Naga was sent flying. Rail stopped in his tracks. I dispelled the magic and landed.

"Lina! What was that for!?"

As Naga snapped at me, I pointed to the ground inside the gate. "That was close. A pitfall."

That was the source of the strange sensation. A part of the ground, hidden by leaves and weeds, now revealed a gaping black hole. It was too dark to see the bottom, but it was probably full of bamboo spears or venomous insects.

"Then just say so! Don't tackle me!"

"…If I’d said it, would you have stopped quietly?"

"Hmph! Don't make me laugh!" Naga tossed her hair. "Do you think I, once I've started running, would stop just because someone said something!?"

...Then what was I supposed to do...

"…A-anyway, looks like there are traps everywhere, so be careful. We should probably head to the main building's entrance from the air. Rail, can you use Levitation?"

"…Yes... I can manage a spell of that level..."

"Then let's go."

The three of us began chanting—

Levitation.

Rail and I finished our spells simultaneously and floated up. It's much easier to handle than Raywing and can reach higher altitudes, but the speed is miserably slow.

Naga finished her chant a bit later.

"Raywing!"

Swish!

As soon as she took flight, she cut through the air and landed at the entrance, leaving us behind.

...This girl...

Suppressing a wave of meaningless competitiveness, I eventually reached the entrance with Rail.

"Hmph. You certainly kept me waiting."

"Listen, Naga! Didn't you think about using Levitation to stay with Rail!? If we act separately, we might get divided and conquered!"

"Hmph! Someone of my stature, Naga the White Serpent, couldn't possibly use a plain spell like Levitation."

"Gah! This isn't the time to worry about appearances... wait..." I stopped myself. "…Naga, don't tell me you *can't* use Levitation...?"

"…I told you just now, 'couldn't possibly use it.'" she muttered in a small voice.

...I see...

"Anyway—let's head inside. Be careful, there might be more traps." I chanted a spell, lit a magical *Light* on the tip of my short sword's scabbard, and held it up like a torch as we moved deeper.

Since there was a trap in the courtyard, they must have at least stopped here once. I still didn't sense anyone, but the risk of traps was high.

But after checking several rooms, there were no people and no traps.

"…They aren't here..." Rail whispered.

"…They aren't..." I replied as I reached for a doorknob—and froze.

"…What's wrong...?"

"Shh. Quiet. ——Someone's there."

Yes, definitely. Beyond that door, there was a human presence.

"Here we go—"

Dam!

I kicked the door open and scanned the room. It looked like a dining hall. There was a fireplace in the back, and broken chairs were scattered about. There were also two round tables—one broken, and the other covered with an old, discolored tablecloth.

I couldn't see anyone, but—

"I know you're in here!"

After a moment of silence—

"…Heh heh heh... you fell for it..."

The triumphant, low chuckle was exactly as I'd expected. It was unmistakably Burglar's.

"That voice... Mr. Burglar!"

At Naga's question, the voice echoed from nowhere once more. "Exactly. I'd like to say 'welcome,' but you're too late..."

"…Um... I don't quite understand the situation..." Rail said in a carefree tone.
...This guy.

"Hmph... then let me tell you. 'Grimms is in Petri Village'—I secretly leaked that info and had you form a subjugation team. Then I used my capture in Petri as bait to lure you all the way here... By doing that, I've drawn Creasall's forces away, while we execute a plan to rescue former Chairman Hummingham from his confinement in the Sorcerers' Guild!"

"——I thought so." I snorted and said it as if it were nothing.

"…What!? You realized!? You!?" burgar's voice was filled with shock.

Of course. Just as I was about to say that—

Clap. A lackluster sound of hands clapping.

"…Ah... I see... so that was the plan..."

...You're off-beat, Rail. The tension of the confrontation was ruined.

"…A-anyway..." I said, composing myself. "Detailed plans aside, I knew you were working with Grimms! The fact that an incident occurred inside the Guild is proof that someone inside was in league with him! Plus, our movements were almost entirely transparent to them!

"Normally, Petri Village is closer to Lemus Town than Creasall. If you'd leaked the info that Grimms was there from the start, a team might have come from the Lemus Guild instead. But that wouldn't have drawn Creasall's forces away. So, you joined the team under the guise of 'trying to persuade him,' pretended to get separated and captured in the mountains, and even called us out here to pull us further from Creasall!

"In other words, you conspired with your old friend Grimms to get us away! I even thought you might be the mastermind, not Grimms! ...I didn't have solid proof, so I kept quiet, but there were countless suspicious things about your words and actions!"

Silence dominated the room after my points—

"…He... hahahahahahahaha!" Eventually, Burglar's wicked laughter echoed through the room. "Don't make me laugh, Lina Inverse! For your information, I am innocent!"

See, I knew it... wait, innocent?

"…W-what are you saying at this stage...?"

"Let me tell you... I was only repeating what I heard from the guys who captured me!"

"…T-then what were all those suspicious actions every day!?"

"That's just who I am!" Burglar—no, Mr. Burglar—stated firmly.

I turned to Rail. "…Is that true...?"

Rail gave a swaying nod. "…Yes... Mr. Burglar has always been suspicious in his daily behavior... He's been misunderstood many times because of it..."

...What a confusing guy...

"Wait—wait a minute! Then, if our actions were transparent to the enemy..." I stopped there as a thought struck me, and my gaze slowly drifted— "…Let me ask

you something... Naga, you didn't happen to tell anyone about our plans, did you...?"

"I did. What about it?"

"AAAAAAAAH! I KNEW ITTTTTT!"

I clutched my head as she answered so casually.

"The day before we left Creasall, some guy told me, 'I'll get in touch with you wherever you go, so if you report your next move, I'll give you money.' Hmph. I think I've already received twenty gold coins."

"Don't 'I think' meeeeee!"

Gomogesh!

My jumping screw kick landed squarely on Naga's head.

"You! Didn't you think that was suspicious!?"

"Not at all." She shook her head with a serene face, completely unfazed by my kick.

...This girl is hopeless...

"Hmph. Has your suspicion of me been cleared? Furthermore, if I were on Grimms's side, how would you explain me being tied up and rolled under the table?"

"…Oh... you're right..." Rail murmured as he lifted the tattered tablecloth and peeked underneath. Sure enough, there was Mr. Burglar, bound head-to-toe in rope like a caterpillar.

"…I'll untie you for now..." Rail said as he undid the ropes.

"…But... why do you act so suspicious even though people doubt you...?" I asked.

Mr. Burglar gave a faint smile. "Heh... suspicious behavior is a man's romance. A woman could never understand."

...Is that how it works...?

"——Anyway. Now that we know, we can't dally. Let’s head back! To Creasall City!"

"I was careless... I was careless, Burglar..."

As soon as the four of us returned to Creasall City, the current Chairman called us in. He spoke with a somber expression. "…Actually, a while ago, another fire broke out in the building. While everyone was in an uproar..."

"Former Chairman Hummingham escaped—is that it?"

At Burglar’s murmur, the Chairman’s face filled with shock. "W-what!? How did you know that!? Everyone was supposed to be sworn to secrecy!"

"Heh heh heh heh... Does it matter how? More importantly, catching him should be our priority."

...You really should stop that chuckle and tone of voice. Seriously. Mr. Burglar really was a guy who was suspicious to the core. Even the Chairman, who should have known him, was looking at him with deep suspicion.

"…Do you have any leads?"

"Yes... Grimms was gone by the time we arrived. Most likely, he played a role in the Chairman’s escape."

Well, according to Burglar, he’d heard that directly from Grimms's men.

"If it’s Grimms, I have a plan. May I ask you to leave this matter to us? Heh heh heh..."

"…U-um... that’s fine, but..." The Chairman nodded, flinching slightly at his suspiciousness.

"——Then——"

"Wait a minute!" It was none other than me who stopped Burglar as he turned to leave.

"Lady Lina? Something the matter?"

There was one thing I absolutely had to say. I looked the Chairman straight in the eye, took a deep breath, and said—

"Naturally, Naga and I will continue to accompany him—"

"Yes, I would hope so."

"…So, I'd like to discuss an additional commission fee..."

"…But Mr. Burglar, that really is suspicious..."

Right after leaving the Guild, we were having a strategy meeting over lunch at a diner in town. There was a cheap cafeteria inside the Guild, but the taste was subpar. Above all, it was certain there had been a mole inside. I didn't know if they were still there, so we couldn't discuss sensitive matters inside the Guild.

"…I see. Was I that suspicious? Heh heh heh heh..." Mr. Burglar looked strangely happy at my words.

"But why do you choose to act that way?"

"Hmph. You wouldn't understand, Lina." It was Naga, not Burglar, who answered. "That's what you call 'aesthetics.'"

"Heh... you understand well..." Burglar nodded with satisfaction.

"Hmph. It's nothing. Ohohohohoho!"

"Heh heh heh heh..."

Stop it, you two. You look explosively suspicious.

A wizard in a hood pulled low and an evil-looking sorceress in a pointlessly revealing outfit—this incredibly suspicious duo was laughing and chuckling in a corner of the shop. Rail didn't seem to mind, and I'd developed some immunity lately, but at least five other customers just walked out.

"——A-anyway, Mr. Burglar, you told the Chairman you had a lead. Was that true?"

"Yes. More or less." He finally stopped chuckling to answer. "I've known Grimms for a long time. I know most of the places he might stop by."

"Then—"

"That's exactly why he won't be there."

——Ah, I see.

"In other words—why Grimms went out of his way to release you after rescuing Hummingham."

"Exactly." Burglar and I nodded in mutual understanding.

"…Wait... what do you mean by that?"

"…Yeah... please discuss it in more detail..." Naga and Rail said.

"Listen. Why did Grimms return Burglar to us so easily? Especially since Burglar knows all his potential hideouts. I think it's because he wanted us to waste our time searching those places. To buy time."

Rail clapped his hands. "…Ah... I see... But, there might be a 'double-bluff'..."

"Maybe. But then if we just searched Burglar's 'leads' normally, we'd find him immediately. Also, think about it. Why did Grimms rescue Hummingham?"

Naga and Rail fell silent—

"…Ah... I see..." Rail clapped again. Naga, however, still looked lost.

"So, what does it mean?"

"Naga... did you think about it even for a second?"

"Not at all." She answered without shame.

...Of course.

"Listen. Rescuing Hummingham is a crime, so it takes a lot of resolve. That means Grimms must have a reason. It’s impossible for Hummingham to return to his position as Chairman, so Grimms can't profit from his power anymore. And I doubt anyone actually likes him or feels indebted to him. Which means—"

"Hmph. I see." Naga finally caught on and nodded deeply. "In other words, there's a scent of treasure."

"Exactly. It wouldn't be strange at all if Hummingham had hidden assets. If that’s Grimms's real goal, it makes sense. He’s buying time to go after the hidden fortune."

"Indeed," Burglar nodded.

"So, Mr. Burglar, do you have any idea where this hidden fortune might be?"

"Naturally... I do."

"…But... how do you know that...?"

At Rail’s question, Burglar gave another low laugh. "Heh heh heh... Does it matter how? Catching them is more important."

See, suspicious! I’m telling you!

"Drake Village—that’s where Hummingham’s hidden assets should be!"

"Blast them! To ganging up on me like that! But you'll see! Now that I’m free, I'll show them!"

Walking down a narrow, nameless highway in the guise of a traveler, spitting curses all the way, was none other than former Chairman Hummingham. He was with three companions, all dressed as travelers.

"——That said, the problem is what comes next. Whether we go into hiding or plot revenge, the four of us can't do much alone." One of his companions, a middle-aged man with sharp eyes, spoke up.

"…Can't you gather some men!? Grimms!?"

At Hummingham's question, Grimms thought for a moment. "——No, unfortunately... If we stopped by my house, I could prepare some funds, but the Guild has surely already made its move there. That would just be turning ourselves in."

"…But! I refuse! I won't sleep outdoors like last night!"

"Even if you say that, staying at an inn would leave a trail... I'd like to at least secure a safe hideout—"

Hummingham was silent for a moment. "——I have one." He muttered.

"——Eh?" Grimms stopped and asked with a puzzled look.

"I said I have one. Actually, I kept it a secret from everyone. Back when I was lining my pockets using my power, there were quite a few narrow-minded people who complained. To avoid their annoying complaints, I secretly bought a house without telling anyone and used it as a safe ever since. It would make a perfect hideout, and we can get funds there!"

"Oh! As expected of Lord Hummingham! To have such deep insight when you instructed us to flee this way!" Grimms exclaimed in admiration.

Hummingham didn't seem to notice the faint mockery in his voice.

"Then let's hurry! Let's head there at once! Where is it?"

"Yes. It’s Drake Village, just straight down this road. A house by the lake, away from the village center. It doesn't look like much, but that was to fool burglars, so just bear with it."

"…Ho... Drake Village... I see..." Grimms gave a satisfied smile. "As expected of Lord Hummingham—I’d like to say that, but while you have a talent for hoarding money, you seem quite indifferent to everything else."

"…What do you mean by that!? Grimms!?" Hummingham’s face paled. Of course, it was too late.

"In other words—now that I know where the hidden fortune is, I have no more use for you."

"You! You intended this from the start!?"

"Of course. That’s why I rescued you..."

"…Didn't you rescue me because you were enamored with my virtue...!" Hummingham said something ridiculous. Who on earth would see his daily behavior and feel "virtue"?

"Well, either way, I have no more use for you, Hummingham. If anything, you'd only be a burden. Fortunately, this road has little traffic. Whether you scream or become fertilizer for the trees, no one will notice."

"——Not so fast, Grimms." The voice came from right above them.

"Nuh!?" He hurriedly looked up. "——Tch! That voice... Burglar!"

A moment later, he let out a cry of regret. He finally realized they had been overtaken long ago.

We had painted the bottom and outside of a large tub sky-blue, piled everyone in, and followed them with Levitation. From the outside, it looked stupid and incredibly embarrassing, but if you stay high and watch your shadow, people rarely notice you're right above them.

"But how did you know? That I was fleeing this way."

"…Well... I figured your goal was the former Chairman’s hidden fortune. After that, it was just a matter of finding the road to Drake Village..."

"You! You knew!? The location of my hidden fortune!?" Hummingham’s face changed completely.

——According to what I heard from Burglar, it was simple: Burglar’s wife’s family home was right next to the house Hummingham had bought as a safe. Once when Burglar visited, he saw Hummingham at the house next door. Hummingham hadn't noticed him, and Burglar hadn't thought much of it at the time. But given how things turned out, he suddenly remembered it.

"…Grimms... I intended to somehow persuade you..." Burglar spoke in a stifled voice.

Meanwhile, Rail and I controlled the Levitation spell and landed in front of Grimms and the others.

"…But hearing your words just now... it seems persuasion would be useless..."

"Hmph... Burglar... let me say one thing." Grimms snorted. "That tub is incredibly uncool."

"STAY OUT OF IT!" Naga, Burglar, and I shouted in unison. ...Damn... for an enemy, he really hit where it hurts.

"…I don't really mind it..." *Yes, yes, Rail. We weren't asking for your opinion.*

"…Anyway. No matter how long we've known each other... no, because of that, I can't overlook this any longer!" Mr. Burglar pointed firmly at Grimms, looking a bit red-faced. ——After stepping out of the tub, of course.

Grimms, however, still looked composed as he scanned the group. "…Hmph... so these young ladies are Lina and Naga. I’ve heard of your skill in effortlessly defeating the men I hired. However..."

Snap! The moment Grimms snapped his fingers, the surrounding forest stirred. Emerging from the bushes were over a dozen assassins!

They were clad head-to-toe in dark green cloth for forest combat, with only their eyes visible.

"I hired these assassins using the Guild's entertainment expenses, just in case a day like this came! Let me tell you, don't think they're the same as the thugs before!"

As expected of someone on Hummingham's side—a magnificent misuse of public funds. But he shouldn't underestimate Lina Inverse.

"Naga! Watch Mr. Burglar and Rail!" I shouted, plunging forward while chanting.

A low sound like the buzzing of insects filled the air. The assassins were chanting too. *Not on my watch!*

"Ice Arrow!" I fired at the nearest man. He narrowly avoided my shot by twisting his body. Like Grimms said, they were pros; they were on a different level than the hoodlums from before. I ran straight into the forest.

Badoooon!

Almost simultaneously, a flashy explosion echoed behind me. ...I knew it. Naga used some reckless spell again. Glad I moved away.

Looking back, sure enough, Naga was standing there with a defiant smile, surrounded by a collapsed Hummingham and several assassins. ...And of course, Burglar and Rail were down too... But that significantly thinned the enemy numbers!

Suddenly feeling a killing intent from behind, I drew my short sword as I spun around.

Ging! A sharp sound rang out as sparks flew between blades. My sword barely managed to block a downward strike from an assassin behind me. I leapt backward while chanting.

After parrying several blows, my spell was ready. I created some distance—

"Ice Arrow!" I released it as I turned. My target was the assassin fighting Naga. He wasn't paying attention to my movements and took the spell point-blank.

I turned back, but the man I was just clashing blades with was gone. Planning a surprise attack? As expected of an assassin, his killing intent was completely masked.

I began chanting again while intentionally looking around in confusion. Once the spell was ready, I shifted my gaze toward Naga.

Immediately, a killing intent bloomed behind me! *Hook, line, and sinker!*

"Fire Arrow!"

My spell created over a dozen arrows of flame behind me.

"What!?" The assassin behind me cried out in surprise. A moment later, my rear-fired arrows hit him directly. These Fire Arrows don't necessarily have to appear in front of the caster; with a little tweak to the chant, you can make them appear behind you. You can't aim as well as when they're in front, though.

I started chanting the next spell and checked behind me. After confirming the assassin was nicely charred, I dashed toward Naga.

Another guy tried to get in my way. I didn't hesitate to retaliate.

"Fireball!"

I fired the orb of light that formed before my chest. Normally, this spell explodes the moment it hits something, scattering flames with considerable power, but it's useless if it explodes too early or too late. The assassin probably knew that. He shifted his body just a step and kept coming.

Too naive!

"Break!"

With a snap of my fingers, the orb split into several smaller orbs and rained down on him!

"————!?"

Kyugogogogogogoh!

The assassin's final scream was swallowed by the explosion. That left...

As I scanned the area for the next target... the enemy presence had already vanished. All that remained was Naga, standing with her hands on her hips, laughing triumphantly.

"Ohohoho! They weren't much! Did they think a mere band of assassins could defeat me, Naga the White Serpent, just by relying on numbers!?"

...Wait...

"Naga, stop laughing and look."

"Hmph. Don't worry, Lina. The enemies are gone."

"I know they're gone. But don't you think the number of assassins we defeated is a bit low?"

"…Now that you mention it..." Naga whispered, looking around.

There were over a dozen when they came out of the forest, but there were fewer than ten lying around. I scanned the area again—

"Grimms is gone!"

"Oh. You're right."

Yes. Hummingham and two of Grimms's men were indeed down from Naga's spell, but Grimms himself was nowhere to be found.

"He probably took a few assassins as guards and headed to Drake!"

"Hmph. Then we have no choice but to chase him. Let’s wake up Mr. Burglar and Rail..."

"Wait, Naga!" I stopped her as she was about to cast a recovery spell.

"…What is it now...?"

"We can't just leave Hummingham and the others here. But they'll just be a hindrance if we take them. That means we have to take them back to Creasall. But Mr. Burglar and Rail alone might not be enough to guard them. So, I want you to go with them. I'll go to Drake—alone."

My eyes were filled with determination as I looked toward the distant horizon.

However—

"Ohohoho! Don't make me laugh, Lina Inverse!" Naga laughed my performance off. "Hmph! I know what you're thinking. 'Since almost no one knows how much hidden fortune Hummingham has, I can pocket some in the confusion and no one will know.' But I won't let you have all the fun!"

...*!*

I was speechless. *Damn, she’s sharp about this kind of thing...*

We glared at each other for a moment—

"…Fine. We'll leave the transport of Hummingham and the others to Mr. Burglar and Rail..."

I was the one who yielded. I thought about flattening Naga and going alone, but it would be bad if she told everyone later.

"Anyway, Naga, let’s heal those two and chase Grimms!"

"——This is it——"

I whispered and took a step forward. Before Naga and me, a small lake sparkled under the midday sun. By the lake in the outskirts of Drake Village stood a lone house. It didn't look like much, but this was definitely it—Chairman Hummingham's hidden safe.

"——They're inside."

"I know."

I whispered as we slowly approached, and Naga answered. I could sense people inside. Most likely Grimms and his men. They'd arrived just ahead of us and were probably in the middle of hauling out the treasure when we arrived. For him, there was no other path left but to grab the treasure and disappear.

That meant he'd be desperate. And he still had assassins left. I was confident we'd win, but he wasn't someone to underestimate.

A short distance away was another house. That was likely Burglar's wife's family home. Well, even if things got a bit rowdy, it was far enough away.

We took step after step toward the house by the lake—

Bam!

The door burst open from the inside. The moment Naga and I looked that way, a killing intent blasted us from behind!

Before we could even turn, we both leapt to the sides.

Gohn!

The spot where we'd been standing was engulfed in crimson flames. ——A Fireball! They'd placed an ambush behind us from the start.

Looking toward where the Fireball came from, there was an assassin who had been hiding somewhere. He closed the distance at once.

"Lina! From the house too!"

Following her voice, I saw five or six assassins jumping out of the house. I began chanting.

"Fire Arrow!" I fired at the man who'd launched the Fireball. But just before hitting him, my arrows were all deflected. Is he using a wind barrier!? Looks like this one can use some magic too.

As I began my next chant, an assassin lunged at me with his blade. I drew my short sword and blocked his strike.

Ging! Our blades clashed, and the assassin slowly pushed against me. Trying to settle it with swords? He probably figured I couldn't use spells at this range.

Not a bad idea, but—

"Fire Arrow!" I cast it anyway. A faint look of confusion crossed his eyes.

Goh!

The next moment, he took my spell point-blank and collapsed. He probably died without even knowing how he was defeated. ...That was a bit scary, though, even for me. I'd made the arrows appear well in front of me—behind the assassin I was clashing with—and fired them back toward myself. Since his body was a shield, I took no damage, but it's not a great feeling having your own spells whiz past your side.

Anyway, that's one.

Meanwhile, Naga was firing spells at the assassins coming from the house.

"Dill Brand!"

The ground beneath the approaching assassins shook violently.

"!?" They leapt back without a word. The earth groaned and rose up, taking a human form. The earthen golem created by her magic swung at the nearest assassin.

But the blow was easily dodged. They were briefly shaken by the flashy spell, but they'd regained their cool. These golems have power, but they aren't agile. They aren't as stiff as stone golems, but if you're careful, they aren't too fast to dodge.

The assassins probably decided it was a waste of time and turned back toward us.

But at that moment—

Guo... o... n...

Doooooon!

The golem lost its balance as it tried to turn and fell with a massive thud. ...The legs were different lengths again...

But it wasn't a laughing matter for the assassin right next to it. He'd let his guard down, thinking he was outside the golem's range, and was crushed by the falling mass. Well, the golem shattered into a pile of dirt when it fell, but the assassin should be buried underneath. ...Well, at least we saved them the trouble of a burial...

Four assassins left.

"Dug Wave!" I touched the ground and activated the spell, then began the next.

"Ice Arrow!" The assassins dodged Naga's spell.

Zubo.

"Gnonuoh!?" One of them let out a weird scream as he suddenly sank into the ground up to his waist.

"Elmekia Lance!" My spell hit the stuck assassin directly. I'd used Dug Wave to dig a tunnel underground as a makeshift pitfall, and it worked perfectly.

But meanwhile, the remaining three were closing in on us. If only the house weren't behind them, I'd just blow them away with a Dragon Slave—

"Explosion!" My next spell went off first. It’s a spell that kicks up dirt in a donut shape around a point; I set that point right in front of them.

The assassins were forced to stop. The moment the dust settled—

"Ice Arrow!" Naga released her spell. One of them couldn't dodge and took a direct hit.

Two left!

Zubo.

"Uaaaaaaagh!?" ...Ah... another one fell into a hole... Lucky me. Some assassins are just entertaining like that.

I finished him off with a spell. Only one left.

"Naga! Ice Arrow!"

"Okay!" She responded and began chanting. I joined in.

Ice Arrow!

We released the same spell in perfect unison! With double the density, the last assassin couldn't dodge and took the full brunt.

Alright! With that—

"…Heh... impressive..." A quiet voice came from the doorway. Grimms slowly emerged. "Your skills are as the rumors say. I suppose a bunch of ordinary assassins I gathered on short notice couldn't defeat you..."

With a flourish of his mantle, Grimms finally stood before us! "Then I shall be your opponent myself!"

Spokoooon!

A single kick from me sent Grimms sprawling.

"…You're weak..."

"Hmph! Don't be ridiculous!" He barked while unable to move. "I never said I was strong! If I were confident in my fighting, I wouldn't have hired people and would have fought myself from the start!"

...Well... he has a point...

"But anyway, that settles it!"

Naga and I exchanged looks. All that was left was to barge into Hummingham's house and "borrow" a little bit of the treasure! This wasn't stealing! It was a well-deserved hazard pay!

The two of us nodded firmly to each other and turned to the house. There, a massive landslide occurred, and Hummingham's house began sinking into the lake!

"…Um..."

"…Uh..."

We both froze.

Godobashagobuzubuzubogogobo...

Right before our eyes, the house vanished completely into the bottom of the lake.

"…Well... we did go a bit overboard. The ground must have loosened..." We ignored Grimms's resigned voice and just stood there, stunned.

On and on...

(Aftermath of the Upheaval: End)

Afterword

L: Japanese summer is coming, coming, coming!

Author: In summer, it’s gotta be barley tea!

L: And so, right here, right now!

Author: We present *Slayers Special* Volume 4, "The Sorcerer’s Guild Conspiracy"!

S: ...Ugh... ugh... it’s been such a long time since I’ve had a turn...

L: Whoa! Subordinate S is right here!

S: ...What do you mean "right here," L-sama...

L: Does that mean, could it be...!?

Author: Exactly! As announced previously in *The Darkness of Vezendi*, it’s time for the "Second! Shine! 120 Million People’s Slayers Popularity Poll" mid-term results announcement!

S: By the way, for those who didn't get *Vezendi*, I’ll repeat the rules just in case: you distribute plus five points and minus one point; anonymous votes are invalid.

L: The tricky part is that minus point, isn't it?

S: We currently have about 300 entries. If you do the math, that means nearly 80 percent of the world's population has voted. (Total lie)

L: Also, taking this opportunity, I’d like to express our gratitude to the editorial staff who handled the tallying on behalf of our lazy author. ...*Cough! Cough!*... Always so sorry... just because the author has that kind of personality...

Author: We had a promise not to mention that...

L: Don’t you talk, Author!

Gogwashiiiii! (Sound of a devastating kick)

S: Th-that kick just now... Muay Thai!

L: Yeah, yeah. Enough with the fighting manga tropes. Let’s just get on with the mid-term announcement.

Author: ...Man. Medical bills aren't cheap these days...

L: Regardless of that. Now! The paper with the tally results has just reached S! And...! (*S flutters the paper open. The three peer in.*) 『*Ooooooooooooooh!*』

L: ...We all shouted without thinking, didn't we?

S: Th-this is... I never thought it would turn out like this...

Author: Hmm... I didn't expect this. I don't think anyone in the general public expected it to turn out this way either.

S: A-anyway, the mid-term announcement. Starting with 10th place...

Author: Wait a sec! Wouldn't it be better to keep things a bit vague rather than announcing the exact ranks and vote counts?

L: Agreed. That’ll make the final announcement more exciting.

S: U-understood. Well then, first, the announcement—or rather, commentary—on those around 10th place. This area is quite a clump, mostly occupied by characters who hovered around here last time, like myself (S), the Author, and the "Big Sis from back home."

L: However, in the midst of that, Phil and Ellis have plummeted! Rising up to take their place, for reasons unknown, are Lyos and Meena! ...Mr. Kanzaka, our commentator, what is the meaning of this?

Author: Hmm... regarding the fact that they haven't appeared lately, both should be in the same boat... I suppose it's a case of Lyos and Meena having small but die-hard, passionate fans.

S: Moving on. Occupying the top spots are, once again, the same as last time: L-sama, Naga, and Amelia!

L: ...Well... I guess it’s better than a total nose-dive...

Author: Look at that philosophical attitude. ...In L’s case, the number of votes isn't actually that low... but the problem is that, no matter how you look at it, the minus points are more than half of the plus points.

L: ...*sob sob sob sob sob sob*...

Author: Now, the real surprise starts here! Let's get to the top ranks!

S: By some twist of fate or karma, the top three are bunched together in a total brawl! Now, now, how will this turn out!? The fierce battle between Zel and Gourry was within everyone's expectations, but the problem is the third person! The one who defied all expectations to join the fray is Xellos! You damn Xellos! You're just a mid-ranking monster! Give me back that talisman from the other day!

Author: Whoa, whoa, whoa! Calm down! Get a hold of yourself!

L: Right! Surprisingly—and I’ll just come out and say this clearly—our protagonist and narrator, everyone's heroine, funny to watch from afar but someone you'd never want as a friend... that Lina Inverse is currently in 4th place, nearly 100 points behind 1st!

S: I wonder what on earth happened.

Author: Hmm... it’s true that in the afterword of *Vezendi*, there were some careless remarks that seemed to pit Zel and Gourry against each other. **L:** *Gulp*. **S:** And the reason Xellos suddenly shot up?

Author: I suspect that "It's a secret" smile he keeps no matter what happens really tickled the readers' imaginations. Since he was a dark horse, he hardly received any minus points either. ...Even so... I didn't think he'd jump this far ahead so suddenly.

L: But Lina’s rank dropping that much is a bit of a shock, isn't it?

Author: Regarding that, it's likely because she won by such a landslide last time that a "Well, she'll be fine even if I don't vote" mentality kicked in among the voters.

L: On this matter, we've received a message from our protagonist, Lina-san.

『I am going on a journey. Please do not look for me.
—Lina Inverse』

Author: .....

L: .....

S: .....

L: She... she sounds like a novelist struggling with a deadline...

Author: Don't say things like that... You... ...A-anyway... Now, will Lina be able to reclaim the top spot!? Or, as the jinx of these popularity polls goes, is it impossible for a protagonist to keep holding 1st place!? However, there are still about six months left until the final tally! The result depends on you! It depends on the postcards of those who haven't voted yet!

L: I'm looking forward to seeing how it turns out.

S: It would be boring if things just stayed the same as they are now.

Author: After all, what we expect is L's massive downfall in the final tally...

Gobu! (Sound of a hit)

L: SHUT UP! Don't talk about that!

S: Also, we won't be doing another mid-term announcement, so the next one will be the final results next year! Well, well, I wonder how it will go.

Author: (Still alive) And so, this concludes the "Second Unexpected Results Slayers Character Popularity Poll Mid-term Tally Report" that we've been carrying on for an eternity.

S: ...Um... will I have any turns other than at the results announcements...? **L:** I don't know.

S: ...*sob sob sob sob sob*...

Author: Well then, everyone.

L: That's that.

All Three: Goodbye. See you again soon.

(Afterword: End)